



LOVE LIKE THIS

A SILENT WOODS STORY

LAIKA WALLACE

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First published by Laika Wallace with Draft2Digital 2025

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Third edition

Cover art by Laika Wallace

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Love Like This

When I first started dating Laurie and Cherry, I knew how I felt about Laurie. Cherry was very pretty, and really cool, and so smart. That wasn't a new revelation. I never thought I'd even come close to being the kind of person who got to hold her hand, though. So I guess even when we decided to make this work, I didn't let myself believe it. I barely knew there was a love like this.

When we first moved, things were nice. It was in the middle of August when we got the place, a cute little two bedroom townhouse, downtown near the community center I volunteered at. Cherry was working full time. Her family's shop was an hour away by bus, and biking was no better, so she gave her bike to her little brother. Every day at ten she'd walk up to bus stop, take a bus all the way down, then get on another bus to her old home and work. Then she'd do it backwards to be home for six, or seven on long days. So every morning, Laurie would be up first and make us tea, then we'd enjoy breakfast together.

Breakfast was special to us. Laurie and I were home all day together, since neither of us worked and I only volunteered for a couple hours every other day, and Cherry usually ate dinner on the way home, so this was the only meal that we all shared.

One morning, Laurie didn't wake us up. I woke up naturally around the time she usually did, half past eight. I rolled over in bed, stretching out and sighing softly. I reached over, from my bed to hers, but didn't feel her. Then I rolled to my other side, my eyes still closed, and felt Cherry's thick, plush blanket.

She mumbled softly, then jumped awake with a snort. "Oh no I've overslept," she said, kicking her blankets off.

I squinted against the sunlight and pushed myself up. "No, it's okay," I said, keeping my eyes on my phone. She wore pajamas, but it was just underwear with little bunnies on it, and I didn't want to be disrespectful. "It's only 8:30."

She let out a big sigh and slowed down. I watched from the corner of my eye as she started to unwrap her hair. She never finished in the bedroom. She'd get her clothes for the day and go to the bathroom. I didn't know if that was for her sake, or if she wanted me to have a private place to change, but I didn't feel right asking.

Our bedroom was big, comfortable, and worked for the three of us. Three beds, two full sized and one twin, were set up side by side with only a little room on Cherry's side to get off. There was the feet of the beds, too, but there was only enough floor space for two dressers along the wall. Luckily, there was a really big closet on Cherry's side, so we had all the space we needed in here for our clothes.

I went downstairs after Cherry. She and Laurie were in the kitchen.

"I've wasted two eggs now trying to make this perfect," Laurie cried, clutching the handle of the pot she was washing. "I don't know how to make poached eggs."

"It's okay," Cherry said, putting her arms around Laurie's waist and hugging her from behind. "It doesn't need to be

perfect to be enjoyable.”

“But I can’t even get them right at all...”

She swayed her softly, kissing the top of her head. Her beaded braids clattered delicately around Laurie’s face. “We can try something different, my dear.”

Laurie put the pot down on the drying rack and rubbed her face with her wrists. “I guess,” she said.

When Cherry let go of her and stepped back, they noticed me standing at the end of the hall, holding the railing. It felt like I walked in on something I shouldn’t have seen. My face turned bright red and I kind of didn’t hear what they said.

“Good morning,” I stammered and hurried to the living room. I turned on the news.

The living room was between the kitchen and the little room at the front of the house, which we used as a split reading room and painting studio. The two rooms were connected by a very large doorway, and there was no wall between the living room and the hall to the kitchen. The wall from the front door ended at the stairs, and there was even a little cut out window in that wall, so the rooms got a lot of light. The front wall was basically one big window, too.

I pulled back the curtains to let the light in, then used the little watering can by the window to water the potted plants.

“Morgan, how many eggs do you want and how much do you want them boiled?” Laurie called from the kitchen. She was still a bit shaky.

“Is three okay?” I asked. “And hard boiled, please.”

“Of course,” she said, and stepped back into the kitchen.

I drifted into the living room and sat down on the sectional couch. Cherry brought in our teas and I took mine with a smile. She sat on the other part of the couch, sipping her tea as she

listened to the weather report. I couldn't help but watch her, but I looked away when she looked at me. She did look at me quite a bit.

Why did I have to be so awkward?

When Laurie came in, the conversation bloomed.

"I hope Arty comes back from his trip soon," Cherry said, taking her plate. "I've been working twice as hard to train my replacement, do my job, and do his job."

"Isn't he coming back on the first of September?" Laurie asked.

She nodded. "I really do hope so. I don't want to wake up at six every day just to get to school."

Laurie frowned. "I'm going to have to bus, aren't I?"

"I can drive you, it's okay."

"I wouldn't want to make you go out of your way," she said, nervously adjusting her hearing aids.

"It's not a problem," Cherry said, placing her hand on Laurie's knee.

I felt myself blushing again, watching how easily they spoke. I focused on eating my eggs and toast, feeling like I was doing something wrong by watching them. By liking them, really. I'd been feeling this on and off since we moved and I was just hoping it would go away with time.

"Where's he gone again?" I asked.

"Arty? He's up in Barrie with his friends. One of their girlfriends lives there with her dad because he's sick," Cherry said.

I nodded. "I hope he gets better soon."

She gave me a serious glance. "He might not."

"Oh," I breathed, nodding again.

Not knowing what to say, we all went back to our breakfast.

I kept my shame to myself. I'd really ruined that one.

Laurie broke the silence after a few minutes, picking up our plates. "I've got my interview at noon today."

"Yeah!" Cherry said, helping take the dishes into the kitchen. "You're gonna do great, I know you are."

She laughed nervously. "I hope so."

"You will!"

With nothing to add or help with, I slunk back upstairs to the small bedroom where my computer was. Before Cherry left for work, I said bye to her and gave her a quick hug. Then I started back up the stairs to my room.

"What are you doing up there?" Laurie asked, following me.

"I just got into a video game Ronnie recommended."

"What is it?"

"Some dungeon crawler, Torchlight 2 I think. It's kinda old. Do you want to watch me?"

She paused on the landing as I opened my door. "I don't know... I'd love to, but I'm so stressed about this interview."

"You're gonna be fine," I assured her. "Like Cherry said."

She fiddled with her hearing aids so much that one's external part fell off. "I've never—" she readjusted it, blushing, then restarted, "I've never had a job interview before is all. I'm definitely going to mess this up."

I frowned. I hadn't had a job interview either, so I wasn't much help, but I offered to try to help her get dressed.

"That would be a huge help," she said, and hugged me.

I stroked her back lovingly. "I promise you'll do fine no matter what," I reassured her again.

She thanked me, albeit halfheartedly, then brought me to our room. I sat on Cherry's bed while she went through her section of the closet. She hummed as she looked, taking out and putting

back several shirts. I zoned out a bit, thinking about what I'd make for dinner.

"How about this?" she asked.

I blinked and refocused my eyes on a pretty blue button down, her lovely champagne dress pants, and a matching tie with silvery threaded diamonds.

"It's a lovely outfit. Very dapper," I said with a smile, then remembered she was applying at a comic shop, not an office job. I cleared my throat awkwardly and struggled to suggest that it might be a bit...

"Too much," Laurie said tearfully. "I knew it." She covered her face with her hands. "Oh, I can't do this..."

I froze up. I honestly didn't know how to help with this. I didn't consider myself to be very smart with clothes, no matter what Laurie and Cherry told me and showed me. I just hugged her and said some generally comforting things, trying to come up with a plan.

She sat beside me on the bed, leaning her head on my shoulder. She heaved a big sigh and wiped her cheeks. "I'm sorry..."

"It's okay," I said, brushing her fluffy hair out of her eyes. "Do you wanna call Cherry? She's better at this stuff than I am."

She patted my leg affectionately. "You're helping, Morgan. Don't say that."

"I meant the clothes," I murmured. "I'll just call her if you'd like."

She looked a bit worried, but agreed.

Cherry picked up after a few rings. "Hi Morgan," she said. "Sorry, I was on the phone with Arty. What's up?"

"Laurie and I need your opinion on what she should wear to this interview."

"Put her on speaker, I'll see what I can do."

I put the phone down on her pillow and turned on speaker. Laurie said hi and she described her chosen outfit.

“Wow,” Cherry said.

“Is it that bad?” Laurie squeaked.

She stifled a laugh. “No, no, it’s just like, you gotta dress for the job you want... That would land you any classy office job in the city, or those upscale fashion stores, but this The Vine. It’s the center of the city’s alternative community.”

“You’ve been there?” I asked.

Laurie nodded.

“Yeah,” Cherry’s voice cracked through the speaker. “Journey works there with one of her partners.”

Journey was one of Cherry’s best friends, and lived near her old place.

“What do you have in mind for me, then?” Laurie asked, anxiety showing in her voice.

“What shirts do you have? Like your regular shirts, no dress shirts or pajamas.”

She blushed, ears to chest. “I kinda... Don’t...”

“Oh Laurie,” Cherry said, tired but loving, “we gotta get you some clothes for this job.”

“I’m sorry—”

“Don’t be! You rock your style and you don’t need a whole new wardrobe, just a couple graphic tees you can be comfy in. Go in my closet and borrow one of my shirts. I know I have a Pinky and the Brain shirt in there, it’s like one of three that aren’t tie dye.”

She got up to look. “What about my pants?”

“What did you say?”

“Her pants,” I repeated.

“Oh, dress pants will do fine I think,” Cherry said quickly.

"It'll look quirky."

I wondered if that was making up for the fact that neither of our pants would fit her.

Laurie thanked Cherry as she changed. She promised to send photos, then passed the phone back to me.

"Thank you so much, Cherry," I said genuinely.

"It's what I do," she said. I could hear her beautiful smile in her voice.

"By the way, what's up with Arty? Is he doing okay?"

"Oh yeah, he's fine! He was just telling me he'd be back on the last of this month."

"That's good," I said. "It won't be long now until you have your car back."

"Yeah," she said. "I'll see you later, Morgan. I love you. Tell Laurie good luck again for me!"

"I will," I said, then swallowed nervously. "I love you too."

I hung up and put my phone in my pocket. Laurie was smirking at me.

"What?" I asked.

"You're blushing," she said.

I crossed my arms. "So are you."

She giggled adorably and spun around, putting her clothes away neatly. I watched her look for Cherry's shirt. All her movements were so purposeful, and almost delicate. I might be overthinking that, though. Beside me, anyone would look delicate, and Laurie was especially small. She knew it made me feel weird, but she loved curling up in my arms, so I tried to associate my size with that all the time.

I looked away as she changed, though she noticed and told me I didn't have to. I still did, until she asked how she looked.

She looked very awkward and uncomfortable. The shirt was

too big on her, making her look younger than she was, and making her tailored pants seem too tight.

I frowned and she started to say something, but I cut her off. "This can work. Can you tuck in the shirt?"

She collected herself and did so.

"Much better," I said, reaching over to help straighten it, and pull it out a little bit so it hung over the waistband.

She took my hand in hers and kissed it. "Thank you," she said softly, looking into my eyes.

I felt myself blushing deeply. I just smiled, unable to find the words.

We spent the rest of the morning practicing interview questions with cartoons in the background, then I walked with her to the community center. She left me there with a kiss and I wished her good luck for the hundredth time.

I spent the next half hour worried out of my mind. When she told me she was out and that she hoped it went well, I was mostly able to focus on working. Then life went on as usual as we waited to hear back, all the while preparing to go back to school. Laurie had to go through several tense phone calls with her mom, who wanted her to have been working for the whole month of August. She refused to listen when she told her that she'd only just gotten an interview from any of the places she'd applied to. She sounded a lot like Mommy. I felt bad for Laurie, but I didn't really know how to show it.

* * *

Arty came back and moved back into his family's place, but Cherry wanted him to come visit so she set up a bed for him on the couch. Her parents wanted her to come back to see them

all together, so she said she'd have a sleepover there the next day. They'd given her room to her younger brother, Aric, since they'd been sharing the space before, she explained to us over dinner.

"I'm excited to see my whole family together again," she said. "I know I see them like every day at work, but that's different. Sleeping in that house and eating a proper meal with them will be so great."

The next morning, as Arty was on his way over with Cherry's Volkswagen bus, Laurie got a call.

She put down her fork and raced into the kitchen, shakily connecting the phone to her hearing aids. Cherry and I shared a look between excitement and anxiety. She stopped eating, but I didn't. For a handful of slow minutes, she picked at the hem of her jean shorts while I rushed through my scrambled eggs and toast.

Laurie came back in, shaking, her face the picture of triumph. "I got the job!"

Cherry and I both jumped up to hug her, all of us laughing joyfully.

"When do you start?" I asked, wanting to kiss her but too nervous to.

"Tomorrow," she said with a slightly panicked edge. "They, the person on the phone, said they've been trying to call me but there's been some urgent stuff going on with some of the regulars. Their name's Adi, they seem really nice." She told us some more about the place, but was worried about getting there on time. She'd taken an extra class the year before, so this year she only had three classes and the free period was at the end of the day every other day. She planned to go to work then, as well as on the weekends. It was quite far from her school though,

despite being roughly a straight shot down a major road.

We thought for a moment, then Cherry blurted, "I know! I gotta call my brother."

Laurie and I waited now as Cherry made a phone call in the kitchen. Neither of us spoke, but it was clear we had no idea what she could be thinking up. When she rushed back in with a big smile on her face, covering the phone's speaker with one hand, we asked in sync what it was.

"Keshaun and Ramesh are coming over once they've unpacked at their place," she said. "They can teach you to skateboard! Ram even has an extra board for you, from his little sister who didn't want to learn. You're a size six right? Your shoes?"

She nodded, but the color had gone from her face. I reached over to hold her hand and she instantly took it. As Cherry ducked back through the door, I asked what was wrong.

"I've never skateboarded before," she said. "I mean, I got on one once and it flew out from under me."

"I'm sure this will be easier," I said. "Arty's friends are nice and I'm sure they'll be good teachers."

She quietly agreed as Cherry came back, the call over. She told us Ramesh was bringing over some of his old Spiderman, Batman, and Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles shirts for Laurie.

"Oh, that's sweet of him," she said too eagerly.

Cherry paused and raised an eyebrow. "What's up, sugar?"

Laurie's cheeks got some color back. "Oh nothing..."

I looked between the two of them, then said quietly, "She's not confident in learning to skateboard."

Cherry laughed brightly, her beads clacking along. "Oh, don't worry, they're great. I learned from them, so did DeeDee. And if my little sister can do it, you can for sure."

"If you're sure..."

It wasn't long before the doorbell rang. Cherry and Laurie were out at the corner store, so I went to answer the door. Arty was standing there in a white shirt and black sweatpants.

He gave me a big smile. "Hey Morgan, how's it going?"

"Good," I said. "How was Barrie?"

"Boring," he said, "and unbearably Caucasian."

I laughed, then asked how the visit was.

He shrugged a bit. "Tanice hasn't been in a good space for a while," he said, but stopped when Keshawn came up.

I assumed she was the girlfriend they'd been up to see, but I didn't know whose girlfriend she was. But by the way Keshawn was holding himself, it felt obvious. He looked like he hadn't slept, his bleached orange hair was a mess, and his shirt was on inside out. He awkwardly said hey and hurried inside, seeming to remember late that he was asking to use the washroom.

"Go ahead, it's upstairs at the back of the hall," I said.

He nodded his thanks and left.

I turned to Arty to ask if he was okay, but he quietly told me they'd broken up right before they'd left. Then, as Ramesh got out of the car with a box, he asked where Cherry was.

"Oh, um, Laurie and Cherry are at the store. They'll be back in a minute."

I stepped aside so he and Ram could come inside too, then we all went to sit in the living room. We chatted for a bit about how things were going, then Cherry and Laurie came home. Arty ran up to give his sister a big hug. Ram smiled to himself as he patiently waited for Laurie to come in.

He was smaller than Keshawn and always held himself elegantly. He was clearly proud of his appearance: his big nose, his black eyes, his neatly groomed black hair, and his well cared for

clothes. I was going to say something to him, but he suddenly looked deeply worried.

"Where's Keshaun?" he asked me.

"He went to the bathroom when you came in," I said.

He frowned and put the box on the floor, excusing himself to run upstairs. I worried for them both, but got caught up in things with Cherry, Laurie, and Arty and barely noticed the two of them coming back downstairs without a word. Keshaun looked better, though.

Ram brought Laurie over to the couch to go through the box of clothes while Cherry talked to her brother and his other friend. Not sure what to do with myself, I sat quietly between them and listened to snippets of both conversations.

"You've got me wearing these pretty dress shirts now," Ram said. "It has been a while since I've worn these but seeing how good you look was the dealbreaker."

"I can teach you how to tie a tie," Laurie said with a giggle, "instead of wearing it as a belt."

"It's fashion, it'll stick."

And...

"Yeah, it was like, two in the morning, Ram was sleeping and Arty was drunk so I had to drag his ass back into the tent then yell at the damn thing to get lost," Keshaun retold a story while Arty suppressed laughter.

"I can't believe you got that close to a coyote," Cherry gasped. "I mean, I— I've been pretty close to a wolf but still."

That startled me. She gave me a sorry look and I laughed.

"What's so funny?" Keshaun asked. "That's scary shit, man."

"Let's get going," Laurie interrupted.

The boys and Laurie made their way outside as I brought the shirts upstairs. I left them on Laurie's bed, not sure if she

wanted them washed first. Back downstairs in the kitchen, Cherry was putting away groceries.

"That looks like more than the corner store," I gestured to the bags on the floor.

"We went to the Asian grocery store," she said, looking up at me and sweeping her curtain of hair aside. "I thought we could make something nice."

"What do they all like?" I asked as I leaned against the counter. "Does Ram know any of his mother's recipes? I know you like her potato curry."

"I was thinking it could just be the two of us."

"Oh."

"Is that a bad thing?"

"No, not at all, I'm just," I struggled, "I don't know."

She got up and leaned against the counter, the sink between us, and tension. "Are you sure that's not a bad thing?"

I was uncomfortably warm all over. I nodded, going over so many different things I should be saying. It took me a few moments to say, "I do want to have dinner with you, I... I've wanted to for a long time..."

She smiled like she knew something and said with a twinkle in her eye, "Are you nervous?"

I ruffled my hair and looked at my feet. "Yes..."

She laughed softly, reaching across to me. "We're girlfriends, honey." Then, sweetly, "You're blushing so much."

Before I could say anything, she closed the distance between us and put her other hand on my side. Her touch was so caring and gentle, I didn't understand. When she touched Laurie with love, it made sense, it was right. With me, I didn't feel like I deserved that. Not from Cherry, not from someone so...

I looked into her eyes, dark and endless and home.

“Can I kiss you?”

I gave her the tiniest nod, and we kissed until the door opened.

“Are you coming to watch?” Keshawn called.

Embarrassed out of my mind, I hoped he couldn’t see us. Cherry let go of me with a silly smile and hurried to the door. I collected myself and followed her outside.

We walked up the street to the nearby park. There were grassy hills on all sides, with the play structure on top of one of the hills. The rest were covered with sparse trees. In the middle, where the land was lowest, there was a concrete circle with some large rocks off to one side. That’s where Cherry and I sat. Arty and Ram were helping Laurie get started on the skateboard, so Keshawn came and sat with us. He didn’t look too great, fiddling with his pearl necklace.

Cherry asked him when he was getting his car.

He put his hand down. “Oh, you know, I’ve already got it.”

“Oh yeah? Why’d you use my car then?”

He laughed. “It’s in the shop.”

Arty said, “One of the wheels isn’t turning,” and waved Keshawn over.

When he came back, I said, “I like your necklace.”

He looked shy, touching it again. “Thanks, it’s my mom’s. She got it from her mom too. I’m her only kid, so she gave it to me.” His lips twitched. “Before she passed.”

“Oh,” I said. “I’m sorry.”

He shook his head, looking down. “It’s alright.”

Cherry saved the conversation by asking, “How’s job searching?”

“Before we left, pretty good. I had an interview at a classy restaurant.”

“Nice,” she said.

He put his hand back down. "A few other places are begging for me, too, you know," he said with a cocky smile.

"I'm sure," Cherry teased.

Laurie yelped and I looked over in time to see her stumbling back into Ram's arms. The skateboard shot towards us. Keshawn stood up and stopped it, then carried it back over. Cherry scooted closer to me. I put my hand on the rock between us, but kept watching as Laurie tried again. When she twined our fingers together, I felt myself blush. We chatted for a bit while watching them. I tried very hard to get over how nervous I still was.

We were caught up in a conversation about a book she was reading when Laurie said, "Look out!"

I looked up just in time to see Ram back into a man carrying groceries. Ram righted himself quickly and turned to apologize.

"Sorry, miss," the man said as he hurried along.

Ram went stock still for a moment, smiling and waving awkwardly with a quiet little laugh. Keshawn hollered in laughter, though, which made me feel bad in the pit of my stomach. Cherry seemed to notice because she squeezed my hand. I leaned into her a bit.

"Wanna go play in the sprinklers?" she suggested.

"In these clothes?"

"It's a sunny day," she said, jumping up. "They'll dry. Come on!"

Hand in hand, we ran past them and up the hill. We hopped over the fence and kicked off our shoes and socks. She slipped out of her denim jacket and pulled her shirt over her head to protect her hair. Without anything more to take off, I put our clothes by the fence. Water splattered against the pavement as she ran around the splash pad, pressing buttons and activating

sensors so all the massive metal flowers turned on. Through the haze of water, the plastic bugs and trees in the play structure came alive. It was magical, chasing her and being chased through a small concrete garden.

Cherry caught me mesmerized, coming up from behind me and hugging me around the waist. I laughed and held her arms, tilting my head back. She kissed my neck. I relaxed, and she pulled me backwards, letting go just in time so that she wasn't soaked by the full bucket of water that was dumped on my head. I yelped and covered my face, ducking out of the way far too late. My hair was completely plastered to my face and I could hear her laughing at me. I shook myself, barely getting dry, and peeled a window in my hair to see she was doubled over, leaning on a bright blue flower that spurted water through her fingers.

"Oh come on," I laughed, flipping my heavy hair over my shoulders, "it's not that funny."

She rolled her eyes with a smile as she came to kiss me. I pulled her out of the way just as the bucket tipped again, splashing water all over our feet. She shrieked a laugh and gripped my arms. I studied her face while she watched the streams of water run over the pavement. The curve of her jaw, the surprise lines on her forehead and around her eyes, the joy in her big and beautiful smile. She looked up at me, her eyes sparkling.

"Morgan? Are you listening to me?" she teased, pinching my arm.

I blinked. "I'm sorry," I mumbled.

"Do you wanna go back home and dry off?"

I said, "What, isn't it a sunny day?"

"Maybe I wanna go home so we can watch something

together," she suggested.

"Okay," I said, and we went to say bye to Laurie, Arty, and his friends before going home.

A few hours later, we got a knock on the door. Arty had come back to ask if we wanted to go with them to Subway for dinner.

"We're gonna cook tonight," I said, leaning on the doorframe, "but thank you."

Cherry came downstairs and called, "I'll cook! Go walk with them, Morgan."

"It's okay, I can help."

"No, I wanna cook for you, honey." She kissed me on the cheek and basically pushed me out the door. "Go on and hang out with them for a bit."

I giggled. "At least let me put my shoes on!"

We walked up the metal staircase that was around the corner and behind the house, then followed the short trail beside a big churchlike building until we were back on the road. It was a pretty short walk in a straight line, through a sleepy neighborhood sandwiched by busy roads several blocks apart. The gentle breeze fluttered through my flowy orange shirt and the skirt that had been made for me by Abigail at camp. Not really engaged in one conversation or another, I listened to Arty and Keshaun talking about which dog breed would be the best to buy, and if it was really better to get a rescue than buy from a breeder.

"I want a big dog who's gentle," Arty said, "and his personality's gotta match mine, calm but ready to go in a second, and's gotta be good with kids. I'm not moving out any time soon and I got my little sister at home, and her friends. She's old enough to not provoke an angry dog, but she's not strong enough to control the kind of dog I'd like. And you just can't guarantee

that with a rescue.”

“Yeah, but aren’t breeders like puppy mill situations?”

“Not all of them. You gotta know where to look, and what you’re looking for.”

“I don’t, man. I just want a dog.”

“Then a rescue might be good for you, but you also have to consider they’re not from a good place most of the time.”

“That’s why I’d get one,” he said confidently. “Put him in a good home.”

I wanted to keep listening, because it was an interesting discussion, but something Ram said caught my attention.

“It’s just, like, you’re so confident in your femininity,” he said, shrugging his shoulders like he was shy. “You’ve got these beautifully tailored suits and fashionable ties, but you’re still getting stuff from men’s fashion stores. It’s really inspiring to me.” He laughed awkwardly and rubbed the back of his neck, dismissing his words.

“No, I understand,” Laurie said with a soft smile. “It was a big relief for me to be able to stop wearing dresses and skirts. My dad has always been supportive of this, and it’s a bonding experience for us to shop together. He takes me to his favorite stores and gets me what we agree looks good on me, and makes sure the tailor knows to fit it to my body without making it look like a woman’s suit. He’s a big help in general...” she sighed. “But yeah, being a woman in a handsome suit and tie is so freeing.”

Ram nodded with just a hint of a knowing smile.

When we got to Subway, Ram and Keshaun went inside while Arty, Laurie, and I sat on a nearby curb beside some newspaper boxes. Arty leaned on one of them, digging a pack of cigarettes out of his pocket.

“Until this trip,” Laurie said, “any time Cherry would tell me

about your friends, I thought they were dating, Arty."

He lit his cigarette and frowned pensively, putting it to his lips. "I can see why."

"They might be now," I suggested. "With Tanice being an ex."

"Keshaun's into girls," Arty said. "Completely straight."

I thought about that silently.

"I can see why you'd think so, though. I can."

* * *

When we were back in our neighborhood, I said bye at the corner and walked up to our house as they all headed back down to the park to eat and keep skating. As I opened the door, the delicious smells of chicken, ginger, sesame oil and garlic filled my nose.

"Welcome home, honey," Cherry called in a sing-song voice.

"Hi," I said, awkward as always. "What are you making?"

"Chicken ramen," she said. "Not instant ramen either! It's not totally authentic, but good enough for something that can be made in twenty minutes."

"It smells amazing," I praised her, tucking my shoes away and hurrying towards the kitchen. "I can practically taste it!"

She met me at the door, catching me and kissing me on the cheek. "No peeking, it's not quite ready..."

"I feel guilty not helping," I protested.

She stroked my arm and told me to relax, sit, and put on something fun for us to watch. I did, trying to remember if she'd ever told me her favorite movie. Knowing we honestly hadn't gotten to spend much time together, I was certain the one that I kept coming back to, *Baby Driver*, was Laurie's favorite. She came in as I was going to look something else up and saw

the preview playing on the screen.

“Oh! That’s my favorite movie,” she exclaimed. “How did you know?”

Guilt shot through me, even though I guess it really shouldn’t have. “Lucky guess,” I mumbled with a halfhearted smile.

She gave me a cheeky smirk as she put the bowls down. “If you say so.”

I shifted in my seat. “Maybe I thought it was Laurie’s favorite movie...”

She laughed out loud as she sat. “Oh wow, really? I’m sorry,” she noticed my embarrassment, “it’s just that she loves Winnie the Pooh.”

“That’s not what she told me,” I said.

“She must have been trying to impress you.”

I blushed from what felt like head to toe. “It’s not the two of you who need to do the impressing here... Making fancy dinners and hiding your cute interests.”

She turned her face down shyly, smiling. “It’s not like you need to impress me, either.”

We both hovered in awkward silence for a moment, breaking it with a laugh before I pressed play and we ate. I’d never had ramen any more real than the instant noodle packs we always got from Walmart, so I had nothing substantial to compare this to, but it was amazing. Even though I was the kind of person to wolf down my food, I tried to savour every bite. It was partially to show Cherry my appreciation and love, but the food was just that good.

We spent the rest of the evening talking, sharing stories about our families and our childhoods. It was amazing; I’d only gotten this kind of thing before with Laurie. I guess that’s to be expected, but it didn’t stop it from hitting me that Cherry’s my

girlfriend, too. I'm her girlfriend, too.

* * *

When we got back to school, the year went by so much easier than any other year. I guess, for me, it was because I was away from Mommy. Trace was the key to communicating with our parents. He sent me updates every few days on how the divorce was being settled, how they were adapting to living together without her. Pa talked to me too, over the phone. I never really heard from Mommy.

Laurie came home every day with new and exciting stories from work. She'd been meeting amazing people who helped her come out of her shell, and I was seeing that at home more. She'd put on her music without asking permission, she'd dance even when she knew we were there, and she even invited one of her new friends, Arlow, to go to lunch on her break on weekends. She'd texted me after asking him and getting a yes. She'd clearly been shaking, making a few typos. I was so proud of her then, and still am all the time.

Cherry was given a break from working while she devoted herself to getting the best grades she could. There was a scholarship for Black girls, one she could use for a course on kitchen management that she wanted so badly to take, and she never stopped talking about it. Laurie's job wasn't bringing in as much as Cherry's had in August, but that was okay. Laurie's family was still helping with rent and bills.

* * *

The amazing news for Cherry came in right before winter break.

We were eating dinner, a passed down family recipe for cheesy meatloaf Cherry had made with us. It was very cold and the bills were getting a bit much, so we had to turn down the heat and wrap ourselves in blankets. Laurie was wearing a pair of my slippers over her own, and we were as snuggled as possible on the couch. The fireplace channel crackled away.

There was a low vibrating from somewhere in the blankets.

"I think that's my phone," Cherry said. "I can kind of hear the song." She put her plate down and struggled through the blankets to find her phone. She was too late, though. The caller hung up.

"Who was it?" Laurie asked.

"Mom," she said. "She'll call back." The phone started ringing again as she spoke.

We moved out of the way so she could go into the kitchen. I hoped she was still warm enough, with her big hoodie and sweat pants. The heat from the recently used oven would help.

"I hope she's warm in there," Laurie voiced my thoughts.

I nodded.

She sighed. "I'll try to talk to my parents again..."

"It's okay, it's not your fault," I said, putting my arm around her and pulling her closer.

"I don't know... It is because of Christmas, or at least that's what Mom said." She lowered her voice. "But they really do have a lot of money. I told them already to dip into my university savings, but they won't listen."

"You don't have to give up going to university because of this," I said firmly.

Cherry came back in, so we dropped it. She had tears streaming down her face, her hand covering her mouth.

I very nearly dropped my plate as I sprang up, arms out to

her. "What happened? Is everyone okay?"

She stepped right into my hug, nodding profusely and trying to get through a sentence.

I stroked her back, gently moving her braids to the other side of her neck so my face wouldn't mess them up. "Take your time, sweetheart, it's okay."

She held me tight and we rocked each other for a moment. She stumbled through relaying the call. Her parents had been hiring other people, experienced cooks in the city and people who needed jobs in the field. They'd been overseeing renovations of a restaurant that had closed down not too far away, right on Bank Street, where Laurie's work was. They were opening a new location, and they didn't just want Cherry to work there. They wanted her to manage it.

"And maybe even own it," she finished, sniffing. "I can't believe it. It's why they've been getting me ready to get a new job."

I leaned back from her a little to see her face. "That's amazing!"

She wiped her eyes with the back of my hand and I offered my shirt. "It's a lot," she said, "but it is. It is amazing. I, I don't think I could do it."

"Is it right away? Being a manager?" Laurie asked.

She shook her head. "It'll be slow, they're gonna let me work my way up. Ron, Derrick, and Natalie, I don't think I've talked about them much but they're good family friends, they'll be the managers first."

"Then you can definitely do it," she said, taking Cherry's hand. "You'll get the experience you need."

She looked like she might cry again. "Maybe..."

As she calmed down, she told us more about the plan. She'd

be working over the break, and the new location would have its grand opening in February. Then she would work there over March break, and start full time after graduation. Then she'd go to Algonquin, hopefully, for just a couple classes.

"I don't need the whole degree or anything," she explained. "It's enough to go to college, for me."

I was going to say something, but she stopped me, a twinkling look in her eye.

"What?"

"Did you call me sweetheart?"

My face got hot. That was the first time I'd ever called her by a pet name. I hadn't noticed when I said it. I was trying to figure out how to respond when she broke into blushing giggles and kissed me.

* * *

We struggled through the conversations of where we should have our first Christmas dinner away. Of course, Cherry'd wanted it at her family's home, and Laurie at hers, though she was more wary. I didn't suggest seeing Pa. Money had been hard on him, since the divorce. A Christmas looked over, a simple one between him and my little brother, was a good thing.

Cherry decided to settle the matter by calling her family, but Laurie's phone rang first.

"Who is it?" I asked when her face went grim.

"My mom," she said in a mouse's voice, and went into the kitchen, dutifully connecting her hearing aids.

Cherry didn't know that things had been difficult between them for a while. The bills were more than she'd initially wanted to pay when she offered to pay for Laurie's place, and while

Laurie was fully able to start applying to university or college, she'd not spoken about it at all. Laurie's mom knew she had a job, too, but didn't know where or what it was. She didn't want to make Cherry feel guilty for not working during school, so she'd asked me to keep it between us.

When Laurie came back in, though, she was smiling. "She said we should join her for Christmas dinner."

"That's sweet of her," Cherry said, "but I'm still going to call my family."

Laurie frowned a little. "She wasn't really asking... I'm sorry."

"Oh," Cherry nodded, "okay. That's okay. I'm still going to call, for myself at least."

"Will you come?"

Cherry didn't answer right away.

Laurie looked stricken with worry. "I'm sorry. She really did say that we should go. Have to go, she said."

Cherry sighed, made an indistinct expression, and went upstairs to make the call.

Laurie kind of squeaked. "Did I do something wrong?"

I hugged her. I couldn't answer that, but that felt so rude to say. Instead, I rubbed her back comfortingly.

After a minute or two, Laurie pulled away and said she had to make hot chocolate.

I sat on the couch, head spinning. Back at home, Christmas was hard. I was never enough of anything for Mommy's idea of what a family Christmas should be, and Pa was always sad about his Christmases growing up, and Trace was never patient enough nor quiet enough and without fail let it slip that he knew what our gifts were. But at least we had a Christmas every year, one that we all knew we'd attend. It wasn't about the gifts, not for me and Pa. I loved the food, and I made that clear until

Mommy made it clear she hated that. Now all I wanted was family. And we couldn't have that if we were fighting and hiding things from each other.

When Cherry did come down, I could tell she'd been crying. I wasn't quick enough to ask what was wrong before Laurie came in with steaming mugs.

"Is that a peace offering?" Cherry said, gently teasing.

She sheepishly passed her a mug, and they sat down.

"Mom wants me home," Cherry explained, "because we've never had a Christmas dinner apart before. But she understands that your family's a bit—" she caught herself and restarted, "That they care about these things a lot."

Laurie suppressed a laugh. "I know, you can say it."

Cherry snorted. "I'm good to come, on one condition. We have Christmas dinner with my family next year."

"We can rotate," I added, getting a little shy when they broke their flow to look at me.

Cherry nodded and smiled brightly. "That's a great idea, my love."

They kept talking, but I couldn't hear a word they said.

* * *

The next weekend was the last before Christmas break, so the three of us had to do our last minute gift shopping. I'd gotten Mommy's card already, and a toy chicken for Trace, who had become obsessed with the idea of raising chickens since he and Pa moved to a small rental in the suburbs that had a good sized backyard. Pa wanted something practical, so I got some Tupperwares. Laurie's gift I'd been hiding for a while, a lovely silky tie with Pooh and little honey jars. I'd even

picked out an afro pick for Keshaun with Arty's guidance, while sneaking some hair care products he was looking at. I had to get something for Ramesh, and Cherry, of course. I wanted to get something for my girlfriends' families as well, but Laurie insisted I didn't, and that she had it covered already. Cherry had been too busy to talk to, working on a long assignment that she'd been told to take home over the break. She didn't want to be. She was doing it now so she'd have time with us. A break is a break, she kept saying, as she dug around online for information from previous students.

Come Saturday, though, Laurie and I all but commanded her to take a break and come shopping with us.

"It will be quick," Laurie assured her. "You know Morgan doesn't like shopping, especially with all the holiday rush."

I didn't know how she remembered that about me.

She sighed with a smile. "Okay, let me get dressed."

As we were almost out the door, there was a knock. I finished tugging my boots on and Laurie stooped to pick up her hat. Cherry stuffed her wallet into her pocket and answered the door.

"Oh, hi Ram!"

"Hey Cherry," Ramesh said.

"What's up?"

"I just wanted to bring you guys this. I'm about to go to Vancouver to see my family for our own little thing, so I wanted to stop by first. Keshaun is actually just about to drive me to the airport."

I jumped up and hurried up the stairs.

Still at the door, Cherry squealed a laugh. "He finally got that car?"

"Yeah!" Ram chuckled. "It's cute how obsessed he is with it."

When I came down, I saw Ramesh had brought in a small Tupperware of cookies and three cards. He waved to me and I waved back, sliding between Laurie and Cherry. We chatted for a minute, then I gave him my gift for Keshawn to pass along. He talked me out of mailing him his gift in Vancouver, then he went on his way.

We went around the back to the small concrete lot where our car was, along with a motorcycle under a tarp that belonged to one of the other residents of the townhouse.

It was a beautiful car. A Volkswagen bus, actually, custom painted in rainbow tie dye. The front cabin was mostly left alone with a comfortable, plush bench seat fitted with seat warmers. The back, however, had two bench seats facing each other like a booth at a restaurant. A cute little table sat between them. It was a restored teak table bought at a thrift store. All the upholstery was dark blue, and the wood, including the paneling on the doors, was painted vibrant swirls of yellow, green, and orange. The doors had little shelves and storage slots that were painted the same dark blue as the seats; that way they were more visible. She'd gotten it from her parents and spruced it up help from everyone in her family.

Cherry drove while Laurie and I sat in the back, across the table from each other. We talked and listened to music the whole way. I managed to get Cherry to tell me what her younger siblings would like, but not her parents. She kept telling me not to worry about them. Even though that felt wrong, I didn't want to offend anyone, so I let it go.

We arrived at the mall and split up. I went straight to Toys R Us. It didn't take me long to find the two things I was looking for, a magnetic puzzle cube for Aric and a mermaid doll for DeeDee. But staring at the shelf full of different blonde, brunette, and red

haired ladies with fish tails, I couldn't bring myself to buy her any of these. Cherry didn't say it, but I felt that DeeDee would appreciate one that looks like her. For a moment I was tempted to settle for something else, but the guilt of that outweighed how nervous I was. I tracked down an employee and asked if this was their whole selection of mermaid dolls.

"Well, we do have some bigger ones," he said.

I shook my head. "I mean, do you have any Black dolls? Like, a Black mermaid?"

He stopped for a second, then nodded with a smile. "Yes! We do." Looking back up at the shelf, he added, "They're very popular because they're sort of a new release? It looks like we don't actually have any on the floor at the moment... Let me talk to my supervisor and I'll get back to you, okay?"

"Sure," I said, and he rushed off. Not really sure what to do now, I stood and looked at mermaids.

When he returned, he had three different dolls. I asked how much they were all together and ended up buying two of them. I chose the one with the blue and yellow tail and the one with the red and pink tail. Looking at the money I had left, I wasn't confident I would find something nice for Cherry here. I texted both her and Laurie that I was going to catch a bus to the nearby thrift store and that I'd let them know when I was done so they could pick me up.

I got off the bus up the hill from the store and trudged through the snow, across the parking lot, and up the stairs to the door. Inside, I traveled up and down the aisles of clothes, looking for something fun, colorful, and swirly. Pretty soon, as is the way with thrift stores, I had a small collection of shirts to pick through. They were all nice enough, but if I could, I wanted to find something unique. Shirts draped over my arm, I looked

through the shorts now. There wasn't a big selection. All the pants were thick or weatherproof. However, looking in the light jackets, I found the only denim jacket in the whole store.

Now I was torn. Did I buy a shirt or the jacket?

I looked down at my skirt. The bottom was soaked with melted snow. I was glad to have leggings underneath, but it was also a thick skirt, made from shirts and torn pants...

Abigail! Of course, she could make Cherry the most unique gift I could give her.

I put back everything I wasn't buying and hurried to the cash. Hiding my purchases in my shoulder bag, I told Cherry I was ready when she was and stood by the window, near the door but in from the cold. Then I found Abigail in my contacts.

On the drive home, Cherry asked how my shopping went.

"Good," I said. "I bought a bit more than I planned to, but that's okay. Also, I'm going to meet Pa tomorrow afternoon."

That wasn't entirely untrue. He did pick me up and we went to a cafe. He was embarrassed about the new place, he said, so we weren't going back there. He filled me in on what had been happening. Trace was doing well in grade eight, but he hadn't made any friends.

"He misses you a lot," he said, fluffing his hair for the fifth time since we sat down. "It's a small place, where we are now, and I can hear him talk to his old friends about you. Most of his friends from his old school didn't transfer with him. He really loves you, Morgan."

I smiled, my heart warming. "I know... I miss him too. How are you doing, though?"

He sighed, tapping his coffee mug. "Oh, I'm... I'm okay. It's been weird, but I'm not really sad or hurt. Does that make sense?" He frowned. "I feel like it doesn't."

"It does, it really does."

He had to leave about an hour later, but I stayed and waited. It only took fifteen minutes for Abigail to walk through the door. I barely recognized her, bundled up and bright red from the cold.

She looked around for a minute then waved at me. "Hi Morgan!"

I waved.

She sat down and peeled off her layers. We quickly caught up, then she asked to see what I had for her. I brought out the shirt and jacket.

She picked them up, turning them over and examining them. "Hmm. Yeah. I can do this. Not here, though. Can we go to your place?"

I thought. Laurie was working for sure. Cherry would be working on her project. She had a study group, but was that Sunday or Saturday?

Sunday, yes, Sunday. We went out together yesterday.

"Sure," I said.

We got coffees to go and set off. We sat up in my computer room, listening to music while Abigail worked. She was very fast, and she was finished and out before either girls came home.

* * *

Next weekend, we got bags and wrapping paper, then we were ready for Christmas with Laurie's family.

The house was quite pretty, standing out in a row of other houses by having a wide, sloped driveway leading down to a large garage door. There was a small staircase leading up to the door, which had a semicircle window above it and a heavy

knocker in the center. The house was half white stone and half sleek black wood frames and panels, so it looked very modern. The roof was peaked, and there was a statue of an owl sitting next to the smaller peak that jutted a little off the front of the house, where a large window overlooked the street.

One car was sitting in the driveway, so we parked on the street and walked up to the door. Laurie knocked. I stood at the bottom of the flight of stairs, shifting back and forth in my thin coat. My breath puffed in the air in front of my face. Cherry stood halfway between us, holding a small bag of gifts to her chest.

Laurie had bought gifts for her family in secret. She also told us to dress as formal as possible. I had no formal dresses, only a sundress I'd bought on clearance in September, so I wore a nice blue blouse and plain black dress pants. Cherry, with her braids freshly redone and dotted with rainbow beads as always, wore a beautiful, long dress with blended shades of pink, yellow, blue, and lilac. It had a solid black bodice. She also wore her favorite earrings, the cherries. Laurie was wearing her favorite champagne suit and light blue dress shirt.

The person who opened the door was tall, brunette, and unhappy. She was wearing a floor length dark blue dress. The skirt was made of a meshy material and flowed away from the tighter slip, which was visible underneath. The waistband was black, and the bodice was studded with sparkling white stones.

"Oh, it's you," she said flatly. She called over her shoulder, "Mom, Laurie's here."

Laurie sighed. "Are you going to let me in?"

"Did you not bring gifts this year?"

"Cherry has them. Rebecca, it's freezing out here. Let us in."

Rebecca sneered. "Cherry? Us?"

“Didn’t Mom tell you?” She sighed again and stepped forward. “This is ridiculous—”

“Rebecca!” a shrill voice rang out from inside. “You’re letting the heat out!”

“Sorry Mom,” she said and zipped away.

“I’m sorry about her,” Laurie said, but there was something missing from her voice.

We came inside and took off our winter clothes. Immediately there was a short staircase up, and a longer one down, hugging the left wall. On the left wall there was a closet. Laurie found room for all of our things, then took the bag from Cherry.

The right side wall was made of angled slats of wood. I peeked through it to see the large living room, with a couple big, plush chairs and a coffee table by the window. In the far corner, a polished dark brown piano was tucked perfectly beside a huge widescreen TV. Seeing the scale of the living room, the high ceilings, pristine white walls, plush apricot carpet and uncomfortably big suede sectional, I shrank into myself.

Rebecca was sitting on the couch, while a boy dressed in a plain white dress shirt and black pants spread out across the large, bedlike extension. Something loud was on the TV. I could smell, from the kitchen, turkey, ham, meatloaf, buttery mashed potatoes, green beans, peas, carrots, stuffing...

“Laurie, come say hello to your mother,” the shrill voice commanded again.

Laurie flinched and ducked into the kitchen through the doorway in front of us. Not wanting to stare after her, I floated over to examine the gold plated trophy cabinet that took up the entire wall of the living room. There were trophies with tennis rackets, running shoes, barbells, a ballerina or three, even a microphone. Most of them were gold, and the rest silver, and

all polished. There wasn't a speck of dust or dirt in or on the cabinet.

"Impressive, isn't it?" a man said, walking towards me from the doorway that was now ahead of me. He was half a foot taller than me, and even though he wore a tailored navy suit, I could tell he was built. He had short but full hair, cut quite like Laurie's, and a gentle face like hers, too.

I cleared my throat and nodded.

He extended the hand that wasn't holding a glass of champagne. "I'm Laurie's dad, but you can call me Trent."

"Nice to meet you," I struggled, "I'm Morgan."

Rebecca looked up from the couch, her arms crossed. "And what makes you think you're welcome here?"

"Rebecca," Trent sighed.

She scowled deeply. "Oh, come on. Laurie can bring her girlfriend but I can't bring my boyfriend?"

A woman rushed out of the kitchen, oven mitts still on. She was a foot shorter than Trent, and chubby. She was wearing everyday clothes and a messy apron, but her comfortable, welcoming clothing was offset by her incredulous expression as she picked her way around asking why I was there.

My face turned crimson. "I... Laurie..." I glanced at Cherry, who was still standing a step or two down, unnoticed.

Trent laughed a mediator's laugh, putting a hand on my shoulder. "Please excuse my wife. Morgan, this is Alison." With a stiff smile and an exaggerated gesture bringing me into the dining room, he said, "She's here for Christmas dinner."

I was ushered with a hand on my back to the stunningly long dining table. It seated ten, but was not the most impressive thing in the room, despite being made of carved wood and already set with fine china sporting holly leaves, with silver

napkins placed delicately beside them. Along the back wall, there were three antique display cabinets full of different china sets. A massive window was on the other wall, the curtains drawn to show the side of their neighbor's house.

"Nice, isn't it?" Trent said, still smiling. "But I would like a better view."

Outside, snow was falling softly against the black sky and tall brick wall. I smiled, peaceful for a moment, trying to collect myself before I was inevitably thrust into a new danger.

I noticed something from the corner of my eye and turned. In the middle of the room, between the dining room and living room, there was a floor to ceiling fish tank that was about the length of the couch. I must have been too overwhelmed to see it before. It was nicely maintained, it seemed, but I didn't know a lot about fish. It had a black base about a foot tall, but otherwise it was all aquarium. On each side, there was a thick pillar of, presumably, concrete wall. There were ledges going all the way up, and real plants grew thickly. They must filter the water. Tiny fish darted around and snails clung to the glass.

"That's beautiful," I said. "How do you feed the fish, though?"

Trent grinned. "Do you want to see?"

"Sure," I said, glancing over at Cherry again, who had slunk onto the main floor but somehow had not been noticed.

Trent went back through the living room to the stairs; I followed him. At the same time, a girl in a gold dress with a sheer layer over top, embroidered with glittery gold stars, came up from the basement.

"Why do I have to be up here if Brody gets to sulk down in his room?" she complained, then froze.

Trent stopped too.

Cherry, hugging herself, said, "Hi..."

"Who's she?" the girl said.

"Laurie's girlfriend," Rebecca said impatiently without looking.

Trent laughed his fake laugh and gestured to me, saying, "Cait, this is Morgan, Laurie's girlfriend. But I don't believe I've been introduced to this young lady."

"I'm Cherry," she said, then held out her hand to shake Trent's.

"How do you know my daughter?" he asked.

She stammered for a minute before Laurie stepped in, loudly clarifying.

Everyone was quiet.

"You have two girlfriends?" Rebecca started.

Trent raised his hands, trying to be a peacemaker before there was much conflict. "Now, who are we to judge what Laurie does," he said, and left it there. He walked back through the dining room.

Rebecca heaved an aggravated sigh and made a show of turning her back on us to keep watching TV.

Cait, holding her head up and fluffing out her loose ombre waves that looked freshly and painstakingly styled, said, "Dad said it, Rebecca. Who are we to judge?" before breezing past us into the kitchen.

Their mother came to stand in the doorway, hands on her hips, still wearing the oven mitts. "Why didn't you tell me your friends were coming?" she said pointedly.

Laurie fiddled with her hearing aids. "I thought you knew," she said in a small voice.

"What gave you that idea?"

"You said to come," she said. "You told me on the phone that we are coming to Christmas dinner."

"No, I told you that you are coming to Christmas dinner."

She opened her mouth to respond, then the realization hit her at the same time that it hit me. You was singular, not plural.

Cherry glanced at me behind Laurie's back, asking for help. I longed to cross the small space between us and hold her hand, but the atmosphere was so tense that if I moved I risked breaking something.

"Laurie, this has always been a strictly family event. You know that."

"Yeah, why don't I get—" Rebecca leaned over the back of the couch to say, but her mom cut her off.

"Rebecca, please," she said, raising a hand to her, looking down and blinking. "I am having a conversation with your sister."

Rebecca turned around, saying, "Yes, Mom, sorry."

Laurie looked much more embarrassed than her mom, though. Her mouth was pulled into a tight line and she was standing incredibly still. Her hands were busy intermittently adjusting her hearing aids and smoothing down her suit. I longed to hold her hand too, and tell her that it would all be over soon.

"They've come all the way out here, Alison," Trent's voice drifted from downstairs.

"This is still breaking our tradition."

"Dad said not to judge," Cait remarked under her breath, glaring at Alison, safely behind her.

She huffed and struggled around giving up. She took the bag of gifts from Laurie, which had been placed on the floor, and said, "At least this is right."

Cait came back after her mom left down the hallway to the back of the house, between the kitchen door and the stairs. "Sorry about her. She's always like this," she said to Cherry and

I. "But maybe if you'd listen and follow the rules it wouldn't happen so much."

Cherry and I didn't know what to say, and Laurie looked well past beaten, so Cait just joined her older sister with a dignified wave of her hand. She, Rebecca, and their brother started talking about us.

"I don't want to be here," Cherry whispered.

"Let's go downstairs," Laurie offered.

"Sure."

The stairs down took us immediately into what Laurie said was the studying room. In the center of the room, there was a large, round table with four chairs spaced well apart. It was spotless. On the back wall, there was a long table with a record player, a box full of records, and a small, rosy lamp. A potted tree was on the floor beside it. There was a large window and a door going outside on one wall, and the other had an isolated desk and chair with a computer on it.

"That's where I sat to study," Laurie said passive aggressively. "If you can believe it. They've made it into the family computer desk, I guess."

"Actually, that's my computer," a soft voice called from down the hall. A lanky, ghostly kid in an oversized gray hoodie and jeans that pooled around his ankles swayed in and out of the open doorway just beyond the corner.

"Hi Brody," Laurie said with a smile. "I'm glad you got one in your own space."

"Kind of."

"Yeah, but what can you do?"

He dug his toe into the ground and I realized for the first time he was the only one wearing shoes.

"These are my girlfriends, Brody," Laurie went on, ushering

us forward. Cherry nervously stepped up between us. "This is Cherry, and this is Morgan. I met them at the camp I went to, remember?"

He nodded. "You live with them now, I remember." He looked us up and down, but wasn't scrutinizing like her sisters had been. "Why are they here?"

Laurie looked uncomfortable. "I misunderstood Mom."

He leaned back into his room, then asked slowly, "Do you want to see my model houses?"

"Sure," Cherry said, brightening up a bit.

He disappeared into his room and Cherry followed him. Laurie took my hand and led me to the doorway.

The room was split in two. The first half was a mess. The closet door was flung open and clothes were scattered on the ground. Plates, cups, and takeout boxes were stacked on top of the computer desk up against the wall, and there were Legos, Nerf guns and bullets scattered on every surface. It was obvious that a twelve year old boy lived here, but I wouldn't believe my eyes if Trace left his room in the same condition. Then, on the other side of the small folding room divider beside the unmade bed, there was a visible shaggy rug, a small wooden dresser pushed into the corner, and a tall display shelf of model houses behind glass. Heavy curtains featuring cartoon characters were shut perfectly neat so the images were coherent. The difference was disorienting, and I felt bad for the kid.

He brought us over to the cabinet with a slight smile on his face. He showed us with great care and attention each of the immaculate models he had, including one sprawling country style mansion with gray stone walls and sloping black rooves, three different log cabins, an artsy modern villa house, and a bright red little home that looked like a birdhouse.

“Do you make these yourself?” Cherry asked.

He nodded. “It doesn’t take me that long. I’ve been doing this for four years now.”

“And how old are you?”

“Eleven.”

“Wow,” she said, nodding slowly. “That’s impressive. Which is your first one?”

He pointed at the most simple of the log houses. “It’s made of real wood. Dad helped me stain it.”

“That’s really cool,” she said.

I was going to chime in, but their mom’s shrill voice rang out in the stairwell, telling Brody to get his suit on.

He sighed and his shoulders tensed. “I don’t want to wear a suit,” he muttered, scowling.

Laurie stepped back and tugged my hand, so I started to follow her back out of the room, but Cherry stayed.

“What would you enjoy wearing instead?” she asked.

“This,” he said, “but Mom says no. It’s sloppy and we have to look good for Christmas.”

“That’s not very nice for you,” she said. “Is there something else that would be nice and comfortable for you? I don’t like wearing formal clothes much either, so I’m wearing my favorite earrings, see?”

As he looked up at her, his face softened. “That’s your name. Cherry earrings.”

She giggled and nodded. “That’s right, that’s why they’re my favorite. Do you have a favorite thing you could wear with your suit? Like a pair of socks?”

He shuffled over to the dresser and immediately found a pair of nice blue socks with orange goldfish on them. As he put them on, Cherry complimented the socks and told him he was doing

a great job. Then the three of us went to wait in the studying room while he got changed.

"That's the fastest and easiest he's ever been calmed down," Laurie said. "How did you do that?"

"My sister and little brother have meltdowns sometimes," she said with a shrug. "It's natural to me."

When he came out, we went upstairs. Trent was sitting at the head of the table in the dining room, with Rebecca and Cait beside him. Kyle, Laurie's other brother, was at the far end on the same side, and between them sat an elderly woman dressed in a plain burgundy dress with a nice gray blazer. She was frowning deeply at her empty plate, her hands folded neatly in her lap.

Brody gravitated towards the fishtank. I followed him, watching the colorful fish with him. He started pointing them out to me: guppies, tetras, platys, and swordtails.

"Are these your fish?"

He nodded very proudly. "I feed them and take care of them all by myself. And I made them this house," he said, pointing down to a small log cabin, overgrown with the natural plants that grew along the bottom of the tank.

"It's an amazing tank," I said. "You're really good at this."

Alison called fussily from the kitchen, "Everyone needs to sit at the table now, please."

"But my fish need to be fed."

"At the table, now, Brody."

He tensed up and balled his fists, raising them to his shoulders. Helpless, I looked between him and Cherry, asking silently for help. Trent, though, saved me by telling Alison to let him feed his fish.

"Show me how you do it," I asked, hoping to engage him like

Cherry had been before.

Stiff and automatic, he opened a cabinet at the bottom of the tank and pulled out a canister of fish food. Then he pulled out a small inserted stool in the side of the wall, using it to climb up to the height of a little door high up in the wall on the side of the tank.

“That’s really cool,” I said as he fed the fish. “Did you design that yourself?”

“Me and Dad did.”

“Okay, enough playing,” his mom huffed again as she came in with a big bowl of mashed potatoes. She was now wearing a long red dress with lace sleeves. “Everyone at the table.”

Brody sat on the other side of his dad, with Laurie beside him, then me and Cherry. I fiddled with the embroidered placemat as Alison went around to each of us, serving us mashed potatoes, peas, green beans, meatloaf, turkey, ham, stuffing, boiled carrots, and cranberry sauce. There was a lot of food and it looked and smelled great. It was weird to me, though, that Alison didn’t serve herself or even sit until everyone else had food.

We said a prayer, then ate. I was excited to taste the food because of how amazing it smelled, but it was underwhelming. Everything could use a bit more spice, especially the meatloaf, which was dry and had too many oats.

I didn’t participate much in the conversation. While I was used to that, this evening made me realize how sad it truly made me feel to stay on the sidelines. But it wasn’t the quality of the conversation around the dinner table. Quite the opposite. There wasn’t a train of thought that wasn’t hostile. Rebecca and Alison coldly competed for the most misery added to the conversation. Cait was full of backhanded compliments and

sugary sweet sarcastic remarks. Kyle kept kicking his mother and Cherry under the table. Laurie was spoken over every time she tried to talk. Even Trent, who I kind of respected, brought everything back to how he was disappointed in the size of his house and how Alison's mother should have been saving for her golden years in a retirement home instead of freeloading.

"I earned my living," he said between gulps of wine. "Alison does too. Women got the right to vote, and weren't you working during the War?"

"Oh, don't you start," Alison huffed, putting her glass down. "I know you do this every year but this isn't like every year. Is it, Laurie?"

I put my hand on her knee under the table as she pushed around a pile of peas.

"I'm sure these girls can appreciate the facts," Trent said.

Alison scoffed. "The facts are that my mother is in no condition to live on her own." She paused to fuss over the elderly woman, trying to get her to finish her dinner.

Brody balled his fists repeatedly. Even a person away from him, I could sense his discomfort strongly. I didn't like seeing their grandmother being treated this way, either. She'd lived a full, long life only to be poked and prodded because she couldn't eat the pile of bland food in such a tense atmosphere. I almost wanted to say something, but Cherry and I were on thin ice as it was.

When dinner was finished and we all got up, I gathered up Cherry's dishes to bring into the kitchen with mine.

"What are you doing?" Rebecca said, wrinkling her nose.

I trembled slightly. "I was just trying to be helpful," I said softly.

"Well, you're making it worse, actually," she said, taking the

dishes out of my hands and practically slamming them down on the table.

“Rebecca!” Cait gasped theatrically. “Don’t be so insensitive. She’s clearly too poor to have a maid like we do.”

They both laughed as they headed towards the stairs. I stared after them, dumbfounded. A maid?

Alison sighed and made a meek attempt to tell the girls to apologize before noticing Brody’s shoes. “Brody! Get those off right now. You know we don’t wear shoes in the house. Especially on Christmas!” She glanced at us and forced a smile. “That’s our family’s little quirk. Formal Christmas with socks.”

He froze up again, shaking and scowling darkly. He made no move to take the shoes off, but shoved his chair back under the table.

“Do not do this in front of the guests,” she emphasized the last word venomously.

Cherry swooped in, getting between Brody and his mother. “Hey, Brody, why don’t you show everyone your cool socks? We picked those out together, remember?”

He started to visibly relax, but Alison stepped around Cherry and grabbed Brody’s arm. “I can parent my own child, thank you very much,” she said, jerking him roughly as she dragged him to the back of the house.

He didn’t make a sound, but he pounded erratically on his chest with his free hand. His knees were still locked and he stumbled every step of the way.

Trent shrugged animatedly as he came out of the kitchen with a full glass of wine. “And she says I’m the bad parent. At least I want a bigger house for my kids.”

Kyle stood up last. He tore his stare away from the hallway where his brother disappeared, lifting his hands and pretending

to shoot at his father from behind his back. After he followed the rest of his family downstairs, Laurie and Cherry pulled me into a hug. There was a lot I wanted to say, and I knew they felt the same. But where would we even start?

We made our way to the landing and I saw Laurie's grandmother leaning over the sink in the kitchen. Concerned, I went to her and asked if she was okay.

She startled a bit, looking at me in confusion. "Who are you?"

"Morgan," I stammered. "Laurie's—"

"Oh," she said, then breathed deeply. "Yes. I'm alright, thank you for asking."

"Is there anything I can do for you? You seem a little faint," I asked, keenly aware that I wasn't sure what to do with myself. My grandparents were never like this.

"It's quite alright, dear. I'll be fine in a moment. But thank you for asking after an old woman like me." She clasped my hand and gave me a warm, genuine smile. "You are a very special young lady."

Alison appeared in the other doorway. "Mom, it's time to go to bed," she tutted.

Laurie's grandmother's soft face went blank again. Wordlessly, she let go and let herself be herded to the back of the house. Laurie pulled me and Cherry to the stairs, overwhelmed. Brody was a step ahead of us, and he wasn't wearing shoes anymore. Cherry clung to both of us, but let go when Alison's footsteps approached from behind.

On the bottom floor, we followed Laurie to the back room. It was well lit by a large fireplace in one corner, crackling away behind glass, and a great pine tree in the other corner. Two large couches were pushed close together in the middle of the room, facing each other across an oval coffee table. A pile of

gifts, most in small packages, was on top of this table. Everyone had claimed their seats already: Cait and Rebecca were on the couch on the side of the room with the tree and fireplace, while Kyle and Trent were on the other. Brody trudged over and sat with his brother and father.

Alison passed us on the way to sit beside Rebecca, saying, "You three might as well sit wherever you want... It's always been boys on one side and girls on the other, but Laurie likes to shake things up a bit, doesn't she."

There was enough room for Laurie on the girls' couch, but not us. We sat with her brothers and father. I tried very hard to focus on anything but that. My face burned, my cheeks itched like I had to shave again and again so they wouldn't see...

Suddenly, everyone lunged for the table. I was jerked back to reality, watching Laurie's whole family jostling and shoving to grab one of the wrapped boxes. Cherry gasped and grabbed my arm, pulling me closer so I wouldn't get hit in the face by an elbow. I looked across to Laurie, desperately trying to understand what was happening, but she was being crushed up against the arm of the couch by her mother.

Then, as fast as it all started, everyone was sitting quietly and unwrapping their gifts.

Cait looked over at us and pouted. "Oh, look who's missing out."

"It's alright," Cherry said with a practiced smile.

Rebecca snapped, "You really are here to make this suck, aren't you?"

"Rebecca!" Alison said, turning on her. "What has gotten into you tonight? Do you want to give them a bad impression of our family?"

"I think you're the one doing that," Trent said under his breath,

rolling his eyes.

"Excuse me?"

Rebecca stood up with an angry sigh. "I'm going to get some fresh air," she said, then stormed off, dropping her partially unwrapped gift onto the couch.

"Do I get that?" Kyle asked, standing up.

"No!" Rebecca shouted from the hallway.

He sat right back down and muttered something I was glad to not catch.

"Great evening we're having," Cait said, then held up her gift before either of her parents could get a word in. "I've got a Rolex. Kind of a bore if you ask me."

"I got the iPhone XS," Kyle bragged, "and I want it."

"Don't lock that one in yet," Trent said with a big smile. He held up the box he got; the largest of them all. "This is the Acer Aspire. Best laptop this year."

"Not the best," Alison said tiredly. "I was right not trusting Laurie to perform this year. Her priorities are not where they should be, evidently."

Laurie looked at her feet, her mouth twisted uncomfortably.

"You just love to ruin things for me, don't you," Trent said, his glazed gaze boring into his wife's skull.

"What did you get, Mom?" Brody interjected, faster than I could process what was happening.

She held up a tiny ring box. "It's a pear shaped diamond on a silver band," she said. "What about you, Brody?"

"A necklace with, um, some kind of stones."

Rebecca walked back in and the room smelled strongly of cigarettes. I tried to hide a cough and she shot me a harsh look.

"What did you say?"

"Oh, uh, the necklace would go nice with the stones on your

dress," I blurted. I didn't know that it would, but I was sure I had to make something up.

She scoffed and rolled her eyes. "They're just quartz. It's not that big of a deal." She stepped past me and grabbed the necklace out of Brody's hands. "Let me see that. They're rubies, idiot. Do you really think that would work with my dress?"

"Rebecca, give the girl a break," Trent said forcefully. He was starting to slur his words.

She ignored him. "Mom, I want that ring," she said, returning to her seat and opening her gift. "Oh, great, this is some kind of gaming mouse, isn't it? Give me that necklace, Brody. You want this."

"Uh, okay," Brody said, resigned. He handed over the necklace and put the new box on his lap.

"Mom, this necklace would look better on you. Give me that ring."

They traded and Rebecca sat back, satisfied.

My phone buzzed.

Cherry: Am I missing something?

I started to type a reply but Alison snapped at me for being on my phone.

"She doesn't even have a gift to trade, Alison," Trent said in exasperation.

"That's my whole point! They've just shoved their way into my family and made everything backwards!"

"Maybe if you'd let me get a—"

"Don't you start about a bigger house, you know this is about—" she stopped and turned to face Laurie. "You. You've always been aware of the rules. But you have to break them at every convenience."

Laurie trembled all over. Even at this distance I could see

tears swelling in her eyes. "Mom, I—"

"Don't you start. It's either us or your friends, not both. Make the decision or I'll make it for you."

The words hung in the air for an eternity. I couldn't even breathe. But when Laurie stood up, I knew it was all over.

"Enjoy the rest of your evening," she said, her voice shaking to the point of being barely audible, but the room was so silent that it was the loudest and clearest thing in the world. "We're going home."

Cherry and I stood up at the same time. We both awkwardly waved as we hurried after Laurie. I was still in a daze. I'd barely processed the thing about the maid. I tried my best to tune out the family arguing as we got our coats on, but I felt like I was being crushed. My chest squeezed and my head spun. I had to close my eyes and lean against the wall as I fumbled with my boot. When I dropped it, I jumped at the sound, and realized I couldn't remember the last time I'd taken a breath.

I flinched as Cherry put her hand on my shoulder. I looked up at her with wild eyes and she stroked my arm reassuringly.

"Breathe in slow," she said softly. "You're okay. You're safe."

Laurie came into focus, shaking. "Here, sit down, I'll get your boots for you," she said in a rush as they both guided me to sit on the stairs. Laurie tied my boots while Cherry sat beside me, her arm securely around my shoulders.

"Focus on me, okay? You have nothing to be afraid of, honey. We're almost out and you can get some fresh air, that'll be much better. We're going home."

"And we're not doing Christmas here again," Laurie said, tugging the final loop of my laces nice and tight.

She and Cherry pulled me to my feet, and we were gone.

In the car on the way home, I pulled out the bag I'd put in the

back.

"I'm sorry," Laurie said in the passenger seat, wiping away tears. "I didn't think..."

"It's okay," Cherry said, glancing over at her. "Nobody's upset with you."

At a red light, I pulled out the two wrapped gifts. "Guys?"

Laurie turned around. "Yeah?"

"Merry Christmas," I said, handing her the presents.

"Oh no, I almost forgot..." Laurie said, sniffing.

"Don't cry," I said softly. "Open it before the light turns green!"

She unwrapped the tie and uncurled it. "Oh Morgan, how did you know I love Winnie the Pooh?"

Cherry giggled. "A little bird told her."

She laughed and squeezed her arm.

A car honked at us so we waited for the next light to unwrap Cherry's gift, the jean jacket with a tie dye shirt sewn onto the back panel. She adored it. Then they both told me their own gift bags were hidden under the back seats, so I pulled them out and delivered them. Cherry got a model of her own car, customized, from Laurie. Laurie's gift was tickets to a movie she'd been talking about. I got a pair of noise canceling headphones from Laurie and a trans flag necklace from Cherry. We all thanked each other quickly as the light changed again.

"There's some for your siblings too, Cherry. We can drop them off when I see Pa tomorrow."

"We'll do it tonight," she said.

So we drove, fast, out to the suburbs where we used to live. Laurie and I waited in the car while she ran up, dropped the gifts at the door, and knocked hard. She didn't wait, running back and taking off as fast as possible.

"Why aren't we staying?" Laurie asked.

“DeeDee will love this. It’s like Santa!”

We did the same with Pa. It was late when we finally got home, and we were so exhausted we fell asleep on the couch, all cuddled together. I’d never known a love like this.

* * *

By the time school ended, Cherry had already gotten into the kitchen management program she wanted at Algonquin and I was really confident in my grades. Exams went by in a blur, and even though neither of my girlfriends were working for a week up to and during exam time, we barely saw each other, since they were busy with graduation stuff too.

That all changed with prom. Or, at least, what we did on prom night. The tickets would have been far too expensive for us to go, so we called our friends to dress up in our favorite outfits, eat pizza, and dance in the parking lot behind our house. We already got permission from our neighbors, both the other two tenants in the townhouse and Mrs. Yang, the kind old woman in the house beside us. Luckily, we had no neighbors in the back, just a massive wall of rock. On top of that was that churchlike building, so there was nobody to bother with the noise.

Abigail was the first to say yes. Then Cherry called Ronnie, but he and his boyfriend had already bought prom tickets. Keshawn and Ramesh could make it, though, and Adi, Laurie’s friend from work. We decided that was enough. Abigail was bringing alcohol, so we figured we shouldn’t invite Ripley, and Cherry was too embarrassed to invite Arty.

“I don’t want him to know I’m going to drink,” she explained, laughing.

I wasn't sure how I felt about her drinking. I kept my thoughts to myself.

Wednesday night rolled around and we, energized from finishing all our exams, set to cleaning the house, buying snacks, and planning outfits. I knew already that I'd be wearing my favorite skirt, the one Abigail made, and the red halter top I'd gotten from the thrift store recently, so I went out back to make sure things were in order. The old picnic table had been dragged out from the stone wall, our car was parked out of the way, and the neighbor's bikes were in their shed. The other neighbors were out of town. Any time now, Mrs. Yang would be getting picked up by her grandson for the night.

Leaning against the table, I looked up at the sky. Fluffy, round clouds rolled by. A couple crows flew overhead. Somewhere, a squirrel was screaming about something. I wondered what. Would I be able to understand it in my wolf body? A twinge deep in my chest made my breathing go funny. How long had it been?

My muscles tightened everywhere. My ribs scraped together, my arm and leg joints burned. My teeth hurt, deep in my jaw.

I forced out a sigh, rubbing my eyes. No, there'd be no difference. There's no difference between this me and the wolf me.

I started back inside.

There's no use dwelling on it.

Not too long later, there was a knock at the door.

"Someone's early," Laurie said from the kitchen where she was dumping chips into a bowl.

I answered the door, and it was Mrs. Yang and her grandson. He translated that she was happy for us and wanted to give us some red bean buns for the party. I thanked her and made a

mental note to bake her something.

Almost as soon as they'd left, Abigail showed up. She was wearing a yellow tank top and overalls, with her hair in a long, shiny braid. She looked great, but she had a bruise on her cheek.

"Don't worry, it was a goat," she said, catching me staring. Or maybe reading my mind. I still wasn't sure how her ability worked.

She followed me to the kitchen, where she left a bottle of vodka on the counter. Laurie was excited to see her. They caught up in the living room. Not long after, Keshawn and Ramesh arrived. Keshawn was dressed as he normally was, in clean track clothes, expensive sneakers, and pearls, but Ramesh wore a floor length dark blue dress with a red trim. I complimented it as I welcomed them inside.

"Thank you," Ram said, noticeably blushing. "It's an Anarkali suit."

There was a knock on the door. "That must be Adi," I murmured as I went to answer it.

"Hi!" Adi said with a friendly wave. They were taller than me, wearing platform heels, tight jeans, and a long black turtleneck under a pink leather jacket. The collar was lined with fluffy white fur. Their hair was in a big and poofy afro, cut slightly shorter on one side and cascading over their head. They wore lollipop earrings that matched their peachy lipstick and nail polish. They had a faint mustache and a small beard and looked vaguely worried behind their glasses.

"Hi, are you Adi?" I asked.

They nodded. "I'm assuming you're Morgan?"

I blushed. "Yeah," I stammered. "Um. Laurie's inside." I stepped aside to let them in.

I had no idea that Laurie told people about me. Enough to

recognize me by.

We all sat on the couch, a tight squeeze, and talked about how things were going. Keshawn had gotten promoted at work, and Ramesh was out of work again trying to start a business online. He'd converted one of the rooms in their apartment into a sewing room, where he made skirts from custom printed fabric. They worked on the designs together, since Keshawn was secretly a great digital artist. He was embarrassed to have that shared, and steered the conversation to what Cherry was looking forward to at Algonquin. While she talked, I refilled drinks. I could predict almost every word she was saying, I'd listened to this so many times. It made me so happy to see her so excited and confident.

"How about you, Laurie?" Keshawn asked.

She laughed quickly. "I'm just working for the moment. Adi, why don't you tell everyone about the guy who came in the other day?"

"Oh yeah, there was a guy with a cape," they said. They went on to tell the story, but I was hung up on how nervous Laurie was. What was bothering her?

The conversation eventually drifted to Abigail telling us about the farm, and how she was unsure of how to prepare herself for going back to camp as a counselor this summer. Adi was interested to hear more about the farm, but Ramesh asked about the camp. Thinking about it made me feel suffocated. No, thinking about how long it's been. I knew Abigail wouldn't say anything I would need to be there for, so I slipped away out the back door.

Soon, we were all outside eating pizza from a really good local place. Every time I went inside to get a drink or use the washroom, I had to remember that the vodka was here. I didn't

know why I was so uncomfortable with it. Mommy didn't drink that much. Pa never did. At least that's how I remember it.

I sighed and shook myself. I didn't need to be thinking about this.

When Abigail did bring out the alcohol, Adi, Keshawn, and Cherry were excited. They were the first ones to try it. I made myself busy taking in plates and making sure the citronella coils were still burning. When I came back to sit down, Laurie was taking a sip from the bottle too.

Somewhere deep inside me, this hit a nerve. I couldn't explain it. It took all of my energy to tell them it was getting too buggy for me and that I'd be inside if they needed me.

I closed the door and got myself a glass of water from the fridge. Through the window in the kitchen, I could see them all at the table. They were laughing, chatting, passing around the bottle and different bowls of snacks. Laurie looked over at the house, so I waved. She didn't wave back.

Heaving a painful sigh, I went to sit on the couch. I was looking for the remote when I heard the door open.

"Drinks are in the fridge," I called.

I got sniffing as a response. I got up to check and it was Ram, wiping tears from his face. Makeup, which I hadn't noticed he was wearing, stained his cheeks. I got him tissues and sat with him on the couch.

When he was able to speak, he apologized.

"You have nothing to apologize for. What happened?"

He shrugged passively. "I don't know..."

"Was it the alcohol?" I said, tilting my head slightly. "It was getting to me too, honestly."

He laughed dryly. "Maybe... Neither side of my family can hold their alcohol so I don't really drink." He sighed and shifted

uncomfortably, crossing his legs. "It's dumb of me I guess."

"It's not," I assured him. "It's fair to not want to drink." I struggled to get around each word. I had no idea what I was doing.

"No, like, that I did."

For some reason, I didn't get the same gut wrenching feeling that I was having before. Maybe I was already full to the brim with it.

"It's just like," he started talking again, looking up at the ceiling and wiping his face, further smudging his makeup, "I feel like I'm not enough of... Of a man. I'm not doing it right, or enough for other people."

"Did someone say something about—?"

"No, no not that. It's not..." he trailed off, shaking his head. It took him several movements of visibly preparing himself to ask, "Does that, did that ever happen to you?"

I froze. He knew?

"I'm sorry, that's presumptuous," he said with another laugh.

"No, it's okay," I said quickly. Of course he knew. Cherry must have said something. "Yes. I understand. Mom— My mother wanted that from me, she wanted me to be..."

"The man of the house?" he said, his lower lip trembling just a bit.

I nodded. "Kind of, yeah."

He swallowed, crumpling and uncrumpling the tissue in his hand. "When... How did you know?"

I paused again. I'd only ever told Suzanne this. I was still waiting to have my intake appointment for HRT, so I hadn't even told any doctors yet. Was I comfortable with sharing this?

He started to apologize again and grabbed another tissue.

"I always felt that I was different," I said, getting right into it

so I wouldn't have time to go back on my decision. "I didn't really ask for girl toys or stuff like that, but I felt... Confused where other kids seemed confident. Does that make sense?"

He nodded and was silent.

I went on, "There was a specific time in grade six I think, where I noticed one of the girls who was nice to me started acting weird around me. When I asked her about it she would ignore me. Then one of the guys said that now that girls, um. Girls were getting," I gestured vaguely to my chest, "that I, that we, boys, weren't allowed to be friends with them anymore. If we wanted to talk to them we were their boyfriends."

He laughed a bit. "That's kind of a lot for grade six," he said. "Sorry, I know it's serious, it's just," he stopped.

I laughed too, a little louder than I wanted. My chest was so tight that it was painful. "Yeah, it was. I don't know where we got those ideas as kids."

"Our parents," he said bitterly, slurring a bit. "Our grandparents." He rolled his wrist to say that it goes on and on. "It's unfair. It's unfair."

I wanted to say yeah, I know. It's terrible. It can get better, though. But I didn't know what he wanted, or needed, to hear. So we sat together for a long time before he thanked me and we hugged. I wanted to cheer him up, and avoid continuing the conversation for both our sakes, so I asked what they'd been doing outside.

"Abigail is really cool. She's just been telling everyone these crazy stories about her farm and weird stuff she finds in the woods." He laughed, and the slurring got worse. "Oh, did you notice how much Adi adores her? It's sweet. I really hope that can end up somewhere."

"Abigail's straight," I said thoughtfully. "At least she told us

that at camp. But you never know.”

“Really...” He rolled his eyes. “Keshaun’s straight too.”

“Yeah?” I raised an eyebrow. “Hey, you never know.”

He stopped staring out the window behind me and it seemed to hit him. “You don’t think so?”

I smiled. “Maybe. It’s obvious you’re good fri—”

He pushed me playfully, laughing to hide embarrassment. “Stop, you’re teasing me.”

I took his hands. “No, I’m not.” I looked him in the eyes. “You’re never gonna know what it’s like until you try it, okay?”

He looked down at his lap, frowning a bit. “You’re right, you’re really right.”

“Do you want to go out there again?” I said, motioning behind me.

He shook his head enthusiastically. “No way. It’s a bit much for me still. And the— the alcohol.”

I nodded. “Do you want to watch a movie with me?”

“Sure.” Then, under his breath, “You’re a great friend, Morgan.”

My stomach fluttered. “Thank you, Ram,” I said. “You are too.”

That’s how we ended the evening together, before everyone gathered inside to say goodbye.

* * *

A couple weeks later, while I was walking to Pa’s, I got a text.

Ramesh: Hey Morgan, do you think you could use she/her pronouns for me?

I smiled.

Morgan: Of course. Do you have a different name you’re

trying out, too?

Ramesh: Not yet. I like when you guys call me Ram though :)

Morgan: Ram it is, then :)

I put my phone away as I came up to his door. It was a small, two floor townhouse squished between two others, like our old place. In the small kitchen window, Trace had put sticky Pokemon decals. I stepped up onto the small concrete porch. There were two doors, one between two curtained windows and the other to my right. I knocked on both of them, not sure which was his.

Immediately, he opened the door in front of me.

"Were you standing there waiting for me the whole time?" I teased, coming inside.

He laughed. "Can you blame me?"

"Where's Trace?" I asked.

"At a friend's place. He met some people who play the same game he does, that one on the phone with the animals?"

"Pokemon?"

"Yes, that's the one. I'm getting him a toy of one of them for his birthday. I found it at the mall."

He brought me on a little tour of the first floor. The kitchen was nice, small but with a lot of counter space. I didn't see a coffee maker, though. When I asked, he looked a bit embarrassed and showed me a fancy little French press he kept in the cupboard.

"Someone on Facebook recommended this to me, now I'm hooked," he said sheepishly.

There wasn't a wall between the kitchen and the dining room, just the counter. There was a small dining table with a bunch of Lego pieces scattered across it. He had a painting hung up on the wall, but not much else was in the small room. In the

living room, though, there was a big, deep couch and a rocking chair sitting in front of a wall-mounted TV. A rickety coffee table stood between them. On the back wall, there was a door to a little porch and the backyard. The rest of the space was occupied by a yoga mat, and shoved in the corner near the stairs there was a mess of blankets.

Pointing at that, he said, "Don't tell Trace, but that's hiding stuff for a hamster."

We sat on the couch and caught each other up on how things were going for us both. Apparently, he'd joined a Facebook group for single Native adults in Ottawa. He was too shy to go to any of the events, where they went to a bar or restaurant to meet in person, but he was going to try at some point.

"Is that why you have a three bedroom apartment?" I asked, trying not to tease him too much.

"Oh, I use the spare room as a study. My new job lets me work from home sometimes, and it's nice to have a space for my books." He went on to tell me that he'd found tons of biographies from different Native people, as well as lots of resources online for people in his situation, who hadn't been able to connect with their heritage until later in life. He got tears in his eyes telling me this, and pulled me into a hug. "You've kept me going through this. Knowing that this was the right decision by you and your brother. Knowing you've got me to look to for help. I wouldn't be doing this without you."

That hit me like a truck. I had no idea what to say. It made sense, and I guess it's always been apparent. The way he always asked after me and made sure to pay attention to what Trace and I were doing in school, in our free time, in our social lives. He listened when I became depressed, he listened when I questioned my gender. He didn't save us from Mommy when

she yelled at us. He didn't stop her. But he protected us in other ways.

I held him tight and told him, simply, "Thank you, Pa."

* * *

After that, I didn't see him and Trace until Christmas.

Even though Laurie was working full time now, money was harder this year. We decided that instead of presents, we were going to make a cake. Laurie commandeered it, and went a little overboard. She managed to put together a chocolate cake and a vanilla cake in checkerboard strips, all on top of a red velvet cake, topped with thick icing and candied cherries. At first, Cherry and I were doing our best to help, but Laurie kicked us out of the kitchen. Even if I watched, I don't think I could have followed along anyway.

The process took all day. By the time we went to sleep, she was completely exhausted. I felt bad that I hadn't been more of a help. The next day, I woke up early, had a small breakfast, and made her tea. I warmed up her favorite scones. I made Cherry a salad, since she'd been eating salad for breakfast for the past few weeks. I brought it all upstairs carefully and woke them up to fresh food.

"Oh, Morgan, you didn't have to," Laurie said, her voice trembling a bit.

"I know," I said. "I wanted you to relax. I ate first, don't worry." She started to get up.

"It's breakfast in bed, Laurie," Cherry protested, putting her arms around her waist. "At least for me it is!"

"But the crumbs," Laurie protested, visibly shaking now.

"I'll get a towel," I said quickly as I left for the linen closet.

Coming back, I handed the towel to her and watched her frantically spread it out. She really wasn't acting herself.

"Are you okay?" Cherry asked before I could.

Laurie stopped immediately, sinking back down with a creak. "I... I don't know."

I cleared a space off of my dresser and put the dishes down before climbing into bed. Cherry and I cuddled with Laurie as she told us her anxieties about meeting Cherry's family and not being good enough for them. She explained that because of how last Christmas went, and because she'd never really had another Christmas experience, it had hit her very suddenly that she had no idea what she was getting into.

"And it feels like, because your family will be there," she concluded, looking at me, "like everyone will judge me. They'll think I'm some kind of stray."

Cherry frowned, saying, "What do you mean, some kind of stray? Because you won't have your family there too? You know Keshawn is going to be there. He's got no family to bring."

"Doesn't he...?"

"He's an only child. His parents both passed away years ago. He's been on his own or with Ram since halfway through high school."

"I had no idea," Laurie whispered, her hand over her mouth.

Cherry nodded and squeezed her shoulder. "You won't be thought of badly, I promise."

"They'll love you," I said, hugging her tight. "Don't worry about a thing, Laurie." I kissed her cheek, and Cherry kissed her other cheek, and she erupted into giggles.

"Okay," she said, snuggling up to me. "I hope so. Let's have breakfast."

The rest of the day went by quickly. Soon, we were dressed

comfortably and ready to go. Cherry waited in the car while I held the door for Laurie, who was carrying the cake she'd put so much work into. I was hoping that Cherry's family would like it as she walked past me, put one foot on the icy porch, and slipped. The cake flew up into the air as she reached for the railing. I dove to catch her, and the cake hit the ground on its side, splitting open the plastic container it was in and splattering all over the iced, salted concrete.

Laurie quickly righted herself in my arms, but she was trembling.

"Are you okay?"

She covered her mouth with a hand and choked out, "The cake is ruined!"

Cherry shot out of the open door. "Is she hurt?" she asked urgently, then looked down. "Oh, Laurie..."

Laurie tried and failed to start a sentence. She clung to me and broke down crying. I didn't know what to do. I just held her, trying to tell her that things would be fine.

Cherry came up to us and put her arms around us both. "It's okay. It's really okay. Let's go to the grocery store and get a cake from there."

"We'll be late," she protested.

"They won't mind. Mom likes to cook her turkey for hours and hours too, so we're not going to miss dinner."

Laurie sniffled. "It's not the same..."

She hummed thoughtfully. "I know. You put so much work into that cake to make sure it was perfect. I know they'd have loved it. But they won't think badly of you for bringing a grocery store cake."

"It had better be the best damn grocery store cake there is," she mumbled, and we all laughed. We laughed so much we

nearly forgot what was so funny. Feeling whole, we got into Cherry's car and drove off.

We found the streets empty as we came up to the grocery store on Bank Street. Cherry pulled into a parking spot, closer than we'd ever gotten to park before. She was going to open the door but froze.

"Oh my God. It's Christmas. The store is closed."

"Everything's closed," Laurie exclaimed from the back. She covered her face. I thought she was going to cry, but she was laughing. "What is happening to us today..."

Cherry settled back into her seat and shook her head, chuckling. "This is really something. Let's go, we're still early enough."

She drove as fast as the van and the roads let her, unburdened by traffic. We only saw a handful of other cars. It was so interesting to see the stop lights and crosswalks still working with nobody around to need them.

We parked in front of Cherry's family's house among a row of other cars. It was a lovely country style house and it was covered in Christmas lights. The restaurant was attached to the house, presumably a renovated garage. The pristine red and white sign sat on the slanted roof, and the windows above were stained glass. Two of the garage doors were still there, but the third had been made into big double doors. I'd never gotten a good look at the place. It was so big and beautiful!

Looking at the house itself, I admired the columns on the porch and the cute sheltered balcony above. The chimney was puffing smoke into the darkening sky and all the windows on the main floor were alight. On the peak of the roof there was a line of reindeer pulling a glowing sleigh, illuminating Santa.

"My brothers made that," Cherry said proudly as we got out of the car, pointing up at the roof. "There wasn't a Black Santa

at any of the stores in the city, so we had to make one."

We came inside through the front porch and were immediately met with the sounds of cheerful music and conversation, the smells of delicious cooking, and a crowd of people in the living room. Cherry got us to hang up our coats in the foyer closet and leave our boots in the small mudroom beneath the stairs. There were tons of shoes there already. As I was trying to find a place for my boots without stepping in a puddle, a pair of kids galloped towards us. They were wearing matching pink spotted dresses.

"Hi Cherry!" the slightly taller girl squealed, hugging her waist. "I haven't seen you in forever!"

"I missed you too," she said, patting her back. "Did my mom tell you about Laurie and Morgan?"

"Yes," the other girl said, staring up at me. "They're your girlfriends?"

Laurie laughed nervously, "Well—"

"They are!" Cherry said with a broad smile.

She grabbed my hand and started leading me into the house. "Come have Momma's bread pudding."

"Ana, isn't it too early for that?" Cherry called after her.

"No," she mumbled, looking up at me innocently. But as she tried to sneak me along the living room wall into the kitchen, a big woman in a raspberry colored romper stopped us.

"Is Ana trying to sneak you a taste of my bread pudding?" She winked.

Ana's eyes opened wide and she started to speak, but her momma scooped her up and flung her over her shoulder. She squealed and kicked her legs.

"Be careful or I'll tell Papa!"

"He'll tickle me!" she wailed.

She laughed and plopped her daughter down, who immediately scampered off. "That Ana is always a handful. Nice to meet you, I assume you're one of Cherry's girlfriends?"

I nodded, tucking my hair behind my ear nervously, hoping I was making a good first impression. "I'm Morgan, it's nice to meet you too."

"You can call me Aunt Charlene. Come and meet everyone."

She brought me around the large living room, furnished with three big couches facing a roaring fireplace with a television on one side. In the far corner there was a spill of Lego, puzzle pieces, and plastic toys, surrounded by children up to Trace's age.

"You've met Ana, so you've met Maria. This is my niece and nephews. Say hi to Morgan," she said.

The two toddlers gawked at me. The fat, short haired boy who was about Ana's age barely stopped energetically building a tower to look at me. The slightly older boy, who was wearing an ugly Christmas sweater, told him not to be rude and gave me a very cute smile, and the girl who was Trace's age scrambled to her feet.

"Hi! Welcome!" she said, her poofy hair bouncing all over. "I'm Yvonne, and this is my brother Izzy, and my cousins Darius and Efrem," she pointed at the toddlers, "and that's Noah. He's quiet. Not rude," she added with a glare at her brother.

"Are you gonna show Morgan around now?" Aunt Charlene asked.

Suddenly, Maria appeared at my hip, Laurie in tow.

"Who've you got?" Yvonne asked Maria.

"Cherry's girlfriend," she boasted.

"Then who's—"

"They're both her girlfriend," Maria interrupted.

"Oh," Yvonne said. "Okay, I'll show you around. Wait, where's your sister at, Maria?"

Charlene whipped around and jogged into the kitchen. The four of us laughed. We were swiftly brought to another corner of the living room, on the other side of the grand brick fireplace from the television. Arty was sitting in a big, green armchair, playing a game on his Switch with a portly, serious-faced teenager leaning over the back of the chair to watch.

"This is Arty and Aric, my other cousins," Yvonne said.

"Whatcha playing, Arty?" Maria asked, wriggling her way onto his lap.

"Mario," he said, as Aric stepped around the chair to greet us.

"Hello, pleasure to meet you, ladies," he said, holding his hand out to me and maintaining steady eye contact.

"Pleasure to meet you too!" I shook his hand. Ladies!

He turned to Laurie and repeated his pleasantries before folding his hands neatly over his belly. His expression remained serious, and slightly confused. He asked us calmly how we were doing tonight, and who we'd met, then asked if we'd like to sit with him on the screened porch.

"Hold up," Arty said suddenly. "Who's watching the kids?"

Yvonne covered her mouth with her hands. "Sorry Arty!" she exclaimed, quickly apologizing to me before running back to her brother and younger cousins.

Unfazed, Aric asked if we'd met his uncle, Ambrose, yet. "He's Yvonne and Izzy's father. I think you would enjoy his company, Laurie."

"I haven't," Laurie said.

Aric was moving to lead us further into the room when there was a static crackle and jazz began to play, echoing throughout the room. We looked over to the source of the sound: a tall,

slender man in a vibrant red, green, and midnight purple three piece suit, the collar visibly studded with gemstones, had just stepped away from the CD player to dance with a beautiful woman in a form-fitting red dress, whose overflowing mane of hair bounced with her movements. Completely in sync with each other, they gazed at each other with a profound adoration. When she turned her face to us, she looked so much like Cherry that I was momentarily stunned.

“Morgan?” Laurie said.

“Uh, sorry, yes?”

“I’m going to step outside with Aric,” she said quickly, looking listless and pained. One hand hovered over her ear, fingers twitching. It must be so loud and overwhelming for her, through her hearing aids.

“Of course, text me if you need me,” I said, wanting to hug her and kiss her but knowing it was better if she just left. And, I realized with a surge of embarrassment, I couldn’t just kiss her in public like this.

As they walked away, I found myself without an anchor. I wasn’t sure where to go, or more, where I was allowed to go. My face and neck burned when I saw I was basically in view of everyone sitting on the couch: Cherry’s parents, I recognized, Charlene, and two other women who sat side by side. Charlene saw me, smiled, and waved me over. I took one step and there was a knock at the door.

“I’ll go,” one of the women said. She was curvy and wore big jewelry and had a similar confidence in her walk that Cherry did. When she walked past me, she smiled warmly. She, and the dancing woman, must be her aunts.

“Come on and sit, Morgan,” Charlene beckoned.

I hurried to sit beside her on the leather couch. It was so plush,

I sank at least half a foot. Charlene put her big arm around me and squeezed, introducing me to Kay and Carl, Cherry's parents, and Jem, Carl's sister. Constance had just gone to answer the door.

Carl and Kay looked how they did last time I saw them, dressed in casual, comfortable clothes, smiling and laughing without a care in the world, and Carl with a freshly shaved head. Kay had her hair cut short too, similar to Charlene's frizz.

"Oh, are you looking at my hair?" Charlene asked, fluffing the twisty strands. "Don't pay it any mind, it's between styles. Yours wouldn't look so good if you kept it straight for so many years!"

I blushed nervously and tried to apologize.

"Your hair looks lovely, Morgan," Kay stepped in, "but have you ever used Moroccan oil for it? It'll make it so soft and shiny, believe me." She went on to tell me more about the benefits of different types of hair oils. Her husband watched her with a fond expression. She only stopped when Constance returned.

Together, I couldn't not look at the two women. Jem welcomed her companion with a graceful sweep of her arm, and they melted into each other, indistinguishable all but for the bright yellow on pristine black of their clothes. Even their elegantly styled hair, like smaller and slimmer dreadlocks dotted with twists of silver metal, matched. And there was something so warm about them, like how the two dancers had looked at each other...

"There's Morgan!"

I looked up just in time for Trace to throw himself at me from over the back of the couch. It took all my strength to keep him from toppling over onto Charlene's lap.

"I'm not the only one here, you little nerd!" I grumbled,

tickling his sides to make him jump back.

I heard Pa laugh. "Yeah, Trace, say hello first."

Kay rolled her eyes with a smile and Charlene chuckled.

Pa came around to say hello and apologize for taking so long to arrive.

I got up and Trace hugged me instantly. I ruffled his hair and looked up to see Keshawn in the foyer, dressed in a new sweater and clean white sneakers, looking absolutely sheepish while talking to someone who I couldn't see. A new girlfriend, I concluded, and was about to ask Trace if he met them yet when I noticed a tall, scrawny girl on the stairs. She was staring right at Trace, her face gaunt and her eyes huge like she'd seen a ghost. I realized that must be DeeDee. I raised my hand to give an awkward little wave and she zoomed over.

"What are you doing here?!" she asked, almost accusatory.

I turned beet red from my chest to my ears. "I, I'm sorry?"

Trace whipped around. "You?!"

DeeDee glanced up at me, her eyes narrowed and her lips pursed. "Do you know him?"

I laughed incredulously. "That's my brother."

"What? You're Morgan, right?"

I nodded, putting my hand on Trace's shoulder, but he swiftly shrugged me off.

"Is there something wrong over here?" Kay asked sternly, appearing beside me.

"No Mom," DeeDee was quick to say. "I just know him from school, that's all."

Kay smiled and patted him on the back. "Why don't you let my daughter show you around then?"

Trace looked mortified as DeeDee roughly grabbed his wrist and pulled him away. I didn't understand what was happening

but I certainly didn't like it. Smiling at Kay, I excused myself to follow them discreetly through the party. I only made it a few steps before Cherry called my name.

I turned around to see her leaning on the stereo speaker, her curtain of hair draped over one shoulder, a champagne flute dangling in one delicate hand. She was absolutely stunning in her glossy black jacket and dark red shirt, form-fitting leather pants to complete the look. Her black eyes sparkled, her smile was like coming home.

"Come over here," she said easily as I blushed from head to toe and struggled to make sense of my feet. She reached out and pulled me closer, introducing me to the dancing couple, Ambrose and Monique.

"Wonderful finally getting to meet the girl who stole the heart of my favorite niece," Ambrose said in a deep and musical voice.

"One of two, I hear," Monique added. She even sounded quite like Cherry.

I smiled awkwardly. "Yeah, Laurie is outside, talking with Aric."

"Oh, that amazing boy," Monique said with a glowing smile. "He's so intelligent. Is he still all wrapped up in airplanes, do you know?"

"He is! He's not changed in years," Cherry said, laughing. "Except that he's got a girlfriend now."

"Is that so?"

"Well, she's a friend who's a girl who's real, real tight with him." She shrugged. "You never know."

"I certainly hope he's got a girlfriend," another man said. He was a plain but strong looking guy wearing a tight black shirt. He had a sharp nose and small eyes, and was bald.

"Why, Sean?" Monique asked, looking a tiny bit upset.

Sean rubbed his muscular neck and puffed his cheeks. "It's a good example to set for—"

"For Izzy?"

I shot Cherry a confused look.

"Arty has had girlfriends too," Cherry tried to introject.

Sean opened his mouth to speak, then closed it again. Ambrose was staring at him with a face of stone.

"Sean!" a man yelled from across the house. "Your wife's asking for you!"

He quickly and awkwardly excused himself into the large, open kitchen. I watched him go, an eyebrow raised.

"I'm sorry, girls," Monique said with a tense sigh.

"No, don't be. He's wrong. It's gross that he is so fixated on Izzy and his friends. He's a ten year old boy, he does not need to be pressured into dating or looking for a role model in Aric for that."

"There is nothing wrong with my son and who he chooses to spend his time with," Ambrose said, shaking his head. "I wish Krys would stop putting up with that man."

Cherry frowned. "I hope this doesn't cause any problems tonight..."

"I won't let it," Ambrose practically cut her off, putting his large hand on her shoulder. "Now, where did you say Laurie is? I would love to meet her."

Cherry went to lead us all to the kitchen, but Ambrose stopped and asked in a booming voice if everyone still wanted the music on. The response was a unanimous clamor, so he grinned, clapped his hands together, and swept us away. Pa gave me a smile as we passed him on the couch. He seemed to be having fun talking to Jem, Constance, Charlene, and Cherry's parents. And there was Trace and DeeDee, talking to Arty. I

could almost make out them asking if they could go outside in the backyard.

Ambrose took us through the kitchen, which was bigger than it looked from the other room. The floors were clean checkerboard, the walls a calming mint. The counter space was overwhelming. One entire wall was a counter, plus a corner and a bit up the other wall. The room was dominated by an island and a long table. The island was covered in trays of sweet potatoes, green beans, Shepherd's pie, scalloped potatoes, and one massive turkey, all steaming. There was salmon, too, and oysters. I was so distracted by the smells of all the food that I almost walked into the dainty woman who was chopping something on the island.

"Sorry!" she said, pressing closer to the island so I could get by.

"It's okay, I'm sorry, I should have been paying attention," I said, trying not to stumble over my words.

"Oh, hey you two," Cherry said, pulling me over to the door to the screened porch. "I didn't know you were going to be here, Ram."

There they were, Keshaun and Ram, sitting on the loveseat pushed up against one of the walls. Behind them through the open curtains, snow fell softly, and the warm, steadily flickering light of the fireplace beside them illuminated both the large room and the snowy backyard.

The porch was the size of the living room, if not a little bigger, and mostly it was taken up by a treadmill, some weights, and a sewing table. In the corner beside the loveseat, there was a small table and some chairs, where Aric and Laurie sat.

"Morgan! Cherry!" Ram said with a huge smile as she waved at us. "I was wondering when you'd come find us!"

I hurried to see her as she stood up and twirled around to show off her long, flowing skirt. She wore a dress shirt tucked in, with a striped tie as a belt.

"I've sewn belt loops onto all my skirts so I could keep wearing ties as belts," she said proudly. "Much to Laurie's dismay."

"Hey, I do think it looks good on you," my girlfriend said with a laugh. "Just not on me."

Cherry got us a couple chairs from the covered outdoor porch so we could sit at the table. Aric was just finishing up telling Laurie, Keshawn, and Ram about the history of air travel and the environmental impact of aircraft. When he was done, Ram caught us up on the job she'd landed at a fancy clothing store. Keshawn told us that he was planning to get a puppy, assuring us that it would be a big, tough dog.

I heard Charlene holler for DeeDee and Trace to come inside, and saw them dash up the back steps and inside. Arty opened the door to let us know to come get food. Everything was set out across the boundless counter space in the kitchen. Charlene, Jem, and a large man in a golf cap handed out plates, cups, bowls, and utensils. We then loaded up with whatever we wanted to eat.

There was so much food! On top of what I saw before, they had roasted asparagus and okra, potato salad, bowls of nuts and dried fruit, and baked avocados with eggs in the middle. Yvonne and Maria were helping a very elderly man choose his food. Noah got one of those plates with built in sections, taking only okra, peas, turkey, and specifically some almonds. Laurie was overwhelmed and awkwardly chose only some turkey, beans, peas, and asparagus. I tried to get some of everything, but it wouldn't all fit on my plate.

Charlene laughed. "Everyone gets seconds, don't worry. And

you'll be taking some home. And Laurie! Get some more, girl, you're too skinny."

She turned bright red. "I guess I'll have some salmon..."

We took our plates to the living room. Arty and Constance brought chairs in from the porch and everyone found a place to sit. The man in the golf cap, whose name I learned was Norm, tossed more wood into the fireplace.

"The only thing that would have made this better is your barbecue ribs, Norm," Monique said as we ate. "Why didn't you bring them this year?"

"The damn barbecue broke. My hip's getting too bad after the accident to stand out in the cold, too."

"What accident?" Keshawn asked, concerned.

He shrugged. "Some asshole hit me."

Izzy gasped and Yvonne giggled.

"Language, Norm," Charlene scolded.

"They're gonna hear it one way or another," he said, then tried to change the subject by offering to show the kids his scar.

I didn't want to see it, so I looked around the room. Ambrose was having a stern, quiet talk with Sean, where Krys was tucked uncomfortably beside him. She was his wife, the woman I bumped into in the kitchen. I watched them for a moment, looking away quickly as she met my gaze.

Constance, Kay, and Jem were giggling and sipping champagne. They'd roped Cherry in, and she seemed to be encouraging Jem to do something, but I couldn't make out the conversation over the music.

Pa and Carl were chatting, I think about work, cars, and something about growing up in the city and how weird it is to live in the suburbs now. Beside them, DeeDee watched a video on Trace's phone, but she didn't look too impressed.

Sitting in the big green chair was the elderly man, who I concluded was Papa. He had finished eating, and had only the two youngest kids and Noah beside him, so I got up and offered to bring his plate to the kitchen.

He smiled a smile that deepened the wrinkles around his shining eyes. "Thank you very much, you're a dear. Could you get me some more oysters? They're my favorite."

"Of course," I said.

He told me how many he wanted and I got them. I got some for myself too, and one of the avocados. I didn't want to seem like I was eating too much. But then I remembered what Charlene said to Laurie, so I grabbed some more roast asparagus and peas, too.

I brought back Papa's plate and pulled my chair over to sit with him. Laurie had joined the conversation Keshawn was having with Norm, so I wouldn't be missed. Arty brought the twins back from upstairs. They'd probably needed the bathroom. He left the girls sitting with us and the other kids. I wanted to ask him something, for a story about his life, but I didn't want to seem weird.

"Have you had oysters before?" he asked before I could decide what to say.

I shook my head.

"Here, I'll show you how to eat them." His fingers trembled as he tried to pick up the tiny fork. He dropped it and sighed. "Well... If I wasn't such an old man..."

I offered my hand. "May I?"

He gave me a warm smile again, raising his eyebrows. "You certainly know how to get a foot in with the family."

I laughed lightly, embarrassed but not wanting to risk running my mouth and messing this up. I picked up the fork and

followed his instructions to sort of push the oyster around in the half shell.

“That makes sure it’s detached,” he explained. “Then just pick it up and slurp it down from the wide end. It’s more aerodynamic that way.”

I watched him eat his before doing the same for one of mine. It was briny, but somehow also buttery and sweet. The texture, too, was unexpectedly springy.

“So, what do you think?”

“It’s really good!”

Once everyone had finished eating, we all brought our dishes to the kitchen. Kay instructed us on where to stand while everyone washed their own plate, except for Papa, Efrem, and Darius. Then all the kids took to gathering napkins, cleaning up spills, and packaging leftovers. The adults cleaned all the serving and cooking dishes. Ambrose turned up the music so we could hear it over the water, the banging, and the chattering. Laurie had to excuse herself, but she told Kay she felt bad not helping, so she got her to take the food scraps out to the big bin in the backyard.

All the chores were done in a flash with everyone helping. With the music turned down and the kids being entertained by Papa and Aric, we spent the rest of the evening dancing until everyone went home.

Cherry and I packed up our leftovers while Laurie waited in the warming car, falling asleep. Our breath made clouds in the tail lights. Looking over at her, shivering, I felt whole. I felt loved, a new kind of love. A love like this that could only be here.

The End

About the Author

Laika Wallace (she/her, he/him, it/its, sie/hir/hirs) uses fiction and fantasy as a tool to explore his experiences being an LGBT two spirit wo/man, reconnecting to his indigenous heritage, being a Reconstructionist Jewish convert, and living with his disabilities, autism, and other neurodivergencies. It lives on unceded Algonquin territory with its guinea pigs and snake. Aside from writing, sie also creates digital art, collages, mixed media pieces, music, and dabbles in sculpture and sewing. Some of hir hobbies include reading, hiking and walking in local natural areas, swimming, trying interesting and new soda flavors, Randonauting and urbex, and collecting pieces of broken pottery.

You can connect with me on:

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